

Viva la Diva!

Margarita Bergen reigns as New Orleans' #1 "Social Butterfly"

By Dean M. Shapiro

"Hello Dahling!"

That familiar greeting is often heard at parties and other social gatherings in New Orleans. The greeter, attired in the latest fashions and colorful hats, is none other than Margarita Bergen, the reigning "social butterfly" of New Orleans society.

"I love New Orleans and I love living life to the fullest," Margarita proclaims as she spins out the tales of an eventful life filled with celebrities, world travel and fun events. Arriving in New Orleans in 1978 from the heart of Manhattan where she was caught up in the Big Apple social whirl, she didn't miss a beat on her arrival here.

The French Quarter art gallery she and her brother Lorenzo opened on Royal Street in the early '80s – Bergen Gallery – quickly became the place to see and be seen whenever there was an opening night party for a featured artist. It was Ground Zero for tourists from all over the world looking to take a piece of New Orleans art home with them, especially JazzFest posters which were among the gallery's top-selling items. It was consistently voted "Best Gallery in New Orleans" and during that time, Margarita was the Grand Dame of the city's fine arts community until she sold the gallery after 22 years.

"I'm one of those transplants who chose to live here for all it had to offer," Margarita proudly stated. "So many people are born here and they don't appreciate it as much as I do. There are very few things that I don't get to do here in New Orleans. I've been very fortunate to be invited to all the openings for the theaters, art gallery shows, Carnival balls and many fabulous parties.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARGARITA BERGEN

COVER STORY



Margarita and Tony Bennett



Rita Moreno and Margarita



Margarita and Alvin Kamura



John Goodman and Margarita



Hoda Kotb, Margarita Bergen and Jena Bush Hager



Margarita Bergen as Queen of Mardi Gras mambo



Margarita and Irma Thomas



King Felipe and Margarita Bergen

I get to drink the finest wines and champagne and dine at the best restaurants.”

Since mid-March, when the coronavirus outbreak reduced the normally bustling New Orleans social scene to a trickle, cultural seasons, entire festivals, parties and other special events were either postponed or canceled. This disruption of the city’s heart-beat has slowed Margarita down but it hasn’t grounded her entirely. Instead of attending three or four events a day (or night) as she had previously done, she’s now down to about three or four a week:

most often dining out at one or more of the top restaurants in the French Quarter and elsewhere around town.

But wherever she might happen to be, it’s going to be visually documented because that’s her career as a freelance photojournalist.

And so, fully masked in accordance with city and state mandates, she’s out on the town, most often with small groups from among her many friends. Busily clicking away with her state-of-the-art camera phone, she sips her beverage of choice - champagne – and savors the epicurean delights from the best kitchens the city has to offer while taking her place as the queen bee of each gathering. She is the diva, the self-proclaimed “fashionista,” widely recognized and well-loved by many!

When cautioned about the possible risks of excessive socializing, she replies, “I can’t help it. It’s what I do. I’m addicted to it and I can’t stop,” she insists, emphasizing that she gets tested regularly and only takes her mask off when eating, drinking and posing for pictures.

Those pictures, along with an accompanying narrative, make up the bulk of her weekly blog which she titles “A Toast to New Orleans.” Her email recipients number in the thousands from all across the globe. The blog is the latest incarnation of a multitude of columns she has written over the years for a wide variety of New Orleans-based print and digital magazines in both English and Spanish.

For the past 15 years Margarita has been



MB at Mardi Gras World

the host of her popular monthly Round Table Luncheons at a succession of first-class restaurants in the French Quarter. The luncheons revolve around specific themes and feature guest speakers expounding on those themes, the most popular of which are Mardi Gras, Tales of the Cocktail, Halloween and Christmas.

The current pandemic restrictions have curtailed the monthly events but they resumed in time for Halloween in October and are planned to continue into November and December and beyond.

Margarita’s eventful life story began in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean island nation of the Dominican Republic. Born in the capital city of Santo Domingo to a Cuban father with Norwegian and Spanish parents and a Dominican-born mother, her family boasts a colorful history. Her half-brothers from her mother’s first marriage were involved in the coup that overthrew the country’s longtime dictator, Rafael Trujillo. Her uncle, Gen. Vincente Bergen, fought in the Cuban Revolution.

Margarita came to the United States in her mid-teens, settling in New York City and attending public schools there before graduating Hunter College (later renamed Lehman College) with a B.Ed degree. Continuing with her higher education, she earned a Master’s degree in Bilingual Education and a Post Master’s in School Administration and Supervision.

As an intern to a deputy mayor in the administration of former mayor Abe Beame in the 1970s, she regularly hobnobbed with prominent political figures and celebrities.

One of her favorite stories recalls her meeting with renowned Broadway composer and producer, Jerry Herman, whose most famous work was “Hello Dolly.” As she recounted, “I went to say hello to him and I said, ‘You know they call me Dahling and I enjoyed that song you wrote called Hello Dahling.’ And he said, ‘Excuse me but it’s called Hello DOLLY’ and we both got a good laugh out of it.”

During her time in New York, Margarita became a culture maven, attending Broadway shows, grand opera performances, performances of some of the city’s world-renowned dance companies and classical concerts at Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall. Her love for the performing arts continued after her arrival in New Orleans and she became a notable arts patron here, often donating works of art to silent auctions at fundraising events, as well as making cash donations and becoming a season subscriber to her favorite arts organizations.

Over the course of her 40-plus years in New Orleans, Margarita has been honored as the queen of the Krewe of Shangri-La and she reigned twice as queen of the Krewe of Cork walking parade through the French Quarter. She was also crowned twice as the queen of Carnival Latino. Most recently she rode through the Quarter as queen of the 2020 Joan of Arc parade and she has been chosen to reprise that role in January 2021.

For more than 20 years Margarita paraded through the French Quarter with a succession of small dogs in the Mystic Krewe of Barkus. Her dogs have been honored as dukes and duchesses dressed in colorful costumes and riding on colorfully designed floats displaying that year’s parade theme.

Margarita has traveled widely, often with her longtime friend, travel writer Patty Nickell. She has been to Western Europe multiple times, including visits to her family’s namesake city of Bergen, Norway. She

has been to Russia, the Baltic region, Egypt, Mexico, South America and all over the U.S. She has gone on trade missions with several New Orleans mayors to Central and South America, the Caribbean and Japan. When she sold her gallery in 2000, she rented a flat on the island of Ibiza in the Mediterranean off the coast of the Spanish Riviera. “But, while my body was soaking up the sun, my mind and soul was still in New Orleans,” she said, explaining why she gave up her lease there.

“I’ve always loved traveling. It has broadened my perspectives of the world and its diversity of cultures,” she said.

“I am very blessed to have wonderful memories of my life, not only in New Orleans, but also in New York,” Margarita added. “I live a very full life and I’m not afraid to say how old I am because I know I look good for my age. I’m going to be 75 in April and it’s going to be a big party coming up.”

Officially retired now from the conventional workforce, Margarita is busy gathering up photos and other materials and jotting down memories she plans on including in a forthcoming book about her life. “I’ve done so many things and my friends have been encouraging me for years to write this book. So now I am doing it and I’m calling it ‘Hello Dahling!’ I can’t wait to see it come out in print.”

To make reservations for Margarita’s upcoming Round Table Luncheons, call her at (504) 495-9181. Early registration is strongly encouraged for the Christmas luncheon (date and place to be announced) because the event often sells out. 🍷



Margarita and Lorenzo Bergen with Tom and Gayle Benson



MB at Zoo To DO



Margarita Bergen



Margarita as Queen Yolanda de Aragon



Margarita with Trombone Shorty and The Dixie Cups



Margarita Bergen with Marc and Michelle Morial

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MARGARITA BERGEN