

Kitchen sink drama

Why are we hooked on *MasterChef*?

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Looking forward to next Sunday night? If not, you're in a minority. One of the most significant events on the Australian entertainment calendar is coming up and unless you spend the next fortnight in a sensory deprivation chamber I guarantee you won't be able to avoid having a conversation about it. No, it's not a sporting event — it's not even an election. It's the final showdown of an amateur cooking competition. Two wannabe chefs will be baking off against each other, for fun and profit. Yep, that's it.

Although Matt Preston has yet to succeed in his campaign to make cravats socially acceptable, he and his fellow judges have still made quite a significant impact. This is year three of *MasterChef*, and it looks like the nation's still mad for it. More than three million people watched Poh fail to impress the whitey judges with a hundred-year-egg during the finale in 2009. Even more watched a nice young lawyer and a kid who looked 15 try to recreate a ludicrous dessert in 2010. That episode was the third most watched show in Australian television history. This season is rating even higher. Who cares about Don Bradman or the wattle — any future citizenship test need only ask the names of the finalists.

Last year's final clashed with the National Debate between Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott, a long-established tradition of Australian democracy. A cooking show up against the centrepiece of the federal election campaign was never going to be a fair contest. Unsurprisingly, *MasterChef* won hands down. Both major political parties — perhaps too busy fighting to the death over the colour of the lectern — conceded the awesome power of *MasterChef* without a struggle and moved the debate forward an hour. Fair enough, too — who'd choose listening to an hour of 'moving forward' and 'stop the boats' on loop over watching some teenager fail to identify hollandaise sauce?

The mania for *MasterChef* is not just domestic. The show is syndicated across the world, from Asia to the Arab League to Israel. It's shown in prime time slots a lot of the time. At eight o'clock each night in the Netherlands, people sit down and watch Australian amateur chefs try to cook tasty food. Who knew there was so little to do in the Netherlands? *MasterChef Australia* may well be our most successful non-crocodile-themed cultural export.

Of course, not everyone's impressed. The

show draws criticism for its focus on emotional journeys rather than technical skill. The title sequence sums it up: only two or three of the final contestants are actually shown cooking. The rest are variously laughing while looking at food, waving bits of fabric or dropping apples. Winning a challenge seems to depend as much on how well the contestants can bravely struggle to hold back tears about how much this dish meant to their long-lost aunt or dead parrot as it does about how well they've actually cooked. Fans of the original UK version are increasingly cranky that the high-drama, emotionally-charged Australian format has begun to be adopted internationally. On the



other hand, who needs a focus on technical cooking skills when you've got heart, great Aussie characters and most importantly an enormous pile of money for the producers to sleep on?

So what is it about this show that has hypnotised the nation? It can't be a newfound love of cooking. I didn't cook before *MasterChef* and I don't now, although I have found myself plating up my takeaway pad thai when nobody's watching. It's also not connected to any impulse to improve our nutrition. You'd be lucky not to have a heart attack eating the food these guys cook. The advertising choices sum up *MasterChef*'s commitment to good health pretty neatly. Channel Ten allegedly stopped judge Matt

Preston advertising Jenny Craig as they didn't think it'd be a good fit for the show. On the other hand, the network apparently has no problem with other judge George Calombaris flogging butter in the ad breaks. Says it all, really.

Even the unabashed fans of *MasterChef Australia* don't always seem to be enjoying it. The *MasterChef* Facebook page regularly has to ban commenters for making vicious personal comments — and occasionally threats — about contestants they found particularly irritating. Accusations of vote-rigging and favouritism are inescapable. People are emotionally shattered when their favourites lose and enraged when those they see as undeserving somehow survive. Matt the Goth, booted off for sneaking in a smartphone, will be a brave man to venture out in public in the next couple of months (and not just because of his stupid haircut). My blood pressure rises every time I see Ellie drop something and giggle, and if Dani gives up halfway through a dish again I will smash something. You'd think most people would have too much aggravation in their lives already to bother getting emotionally invested in the cooking woes of half-competent strangers, but apparently you'd be wrong.

Angry fans aside, though, the show itself is relentlessly positive. Even when the contestants are crying about some family tragedy — or, more often, just about the fact they're a bit crap — the three judges and the heartwarming soundtrack are there to make everything OK. In this spirit, this season someone even nobly sacrificed himself on the altar of elimination to save a more committed but less skilled contestant, showing a fundamental misunderstanding of how talent-based competitions work. One of the best episodes of the season was last Monday, when the contestants cooked for their families who they hadn't seen in months, with no threat of elimination. It was difficult not to be touched by the sight of Kate reuniting with her very telegenic small children. Of course, later in the show the kids' hopes of seeing Mum come home for dinner were ripped away as she didn't quite cook well enough to win, but that's another issue.

The creators of *MasterChef* have accomplished an astonishing thing. I have no interest in cooking, celebrity chefs or reality television contestants, but next Sunday I'll join the majority of the television-viewing public in watching someone win a hundred grand and someone else get enough exposure to start their own vanity TV project. I'm still not sure why.

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