

## MasterChef goes literary on a not-so-Roman Holiday



The *MasterChef* judges greet the contestants in Rome.

Ten weeks of gruelling broadcast have produced ten kinds of gruelling contestant who, together, have become so dangerously upbeat, they threaten our national character. As we all know, it's un-Australian to be this chirpy. So, in a deal negotiated with international quarantine and inspection services, *MasterChef* has temporarily isolated these infectious agents in an off-shore sound-stage. They have been told this secure facility is "Rome".

One of the charming things about this year's batch of amateur cookies is their innocence. Almost uniformly, they seem to have had their faculty for criticism removed and replaced with a smile and a Food Dream™. Everything they eat is a marvel and everyone they meet is a god. Even everyday décor manages to engage all their senses; as they pass a fairly middling display of pot-plants at the airport, the contestants gasp and say, "This is just so wonderful! I could stay here!"

It seems to me that producers could have saved an awful lot of money and worry by keeping Kylie et al at the pot-plant display at Kingsford Smith for a week. But, no expense is to be spared in isolating these ever-more peppy Food Dreamers from the general population and taking them to a place full of EVEN BETTER pot-plants. "Viva Roma!" says Audra in Spanish. Alice wears a "Roma" t-shirt on the plane. Call me old-fashioned, but I do not believe this sort of thing should be permitted in business class.



Julia and Mindy take in the sights.

We then enjoy – by which we mean "painfully endure" – a 10-minute aerial shot of the Roman skyline. The vision is unremarkable but, clearly, somebody had gone to all the trouble of hiring a helicopter. We swoop by some Renaissance-kitsch fountains and on to the image of Gary, George and Matt standing like Colossi in a piazza ready to talk nonsense about food that "tells a story".

"This is no Roman Holiday," warns George. For which all contestants are glad because telling the story of a Crown Princess who falls hard for a hardboiled American newsman might be difficult to express using only farina and basil.

Five teams of two players are dispatched to have a "Roman Experience" that does not involve Gregory Peck. Gary and Matt repeatedly warn that the food must have a "story" and everyone pretends to know what this means. Something something have a Roman experience something make food something story something.



Alice and Wade's squid ink gnocchi with Roman artichokes.

Loose on the streets of the thing that appears to be Rome with only a television production crew and Alice for company, Wade tells the lens that he is eager not to play to "generic stereotypes". He and his partner in storytelling elect to play to brand-name stereotypes instead as they spend several minutes fawning over bread that has been dyed an unpleasant shade of grey.

"The Pantheon is pretty much the oldest building in Rome," says Mindy, showing her keen interest in classical architecture. Her food story, shared with Julia-Droid, will be rich in metaphor and authenticity, no doubt as she asks two blokes dressed in cheesy Centurion outfits for an "authentic" Roman food experience. This strikes me as about as sensible as asking a bloke dressed in a koala suit to name his favourite passages from *The Fatal Shore*. But, then, what do I know? I don't have a Food Dream™.

What I do have, though, is a growing fascination for Deb. Paired with Ben, this beguiling lady became very interested with a rare thing called a "fig" which we just don't have in Australia. As the Roman provedore explained that "fig" is often paired with something called "cheese", Deb nearly erupted with wonder and seized upon this culinary novelty like a wolf-mother might seize upon the consumption of her young.

In the collection of their "food story", Beau and Audra asked some chick what was in her shopping bag. "Pork," she replied, and the pair set about writing a magical-realist short story based on the magic of butchery. Meanwhile, Andy and Kylie spend several hours searching for coratella; or, as Andy unflinchingly describes it, "the insides of a lamb". The two wait as a butcher hacks the guts of a very young sheep before their eyes and apparently this "Roman Food Story" will have a sort of homicidal CSI edge to it.

With all authors preparing their Food Stories, we are led to a place called Villa Aurelia; a place of such transcendent beauty that it is bettered only by our more upscale shopping mall food courts.

"What better place to taste your Roman story?" asks Matt. And everyone pretends to believe that this is an actual sentence.

It is revealed that a chap called Massimo Bottura will be one of the literary critics today. Alice nearly



loses her biscuits and remarks that this is like meeting Friedrich Nietzsche. I had not heard of Bottura before, but I am grateful to Alice for explaining that he's a clinically depressed, 19th century German thinker whose near-impenetrable oeuvre caused me to fail second-year university.

Now, these five teams try to transliterate their "Roman story" into a more-or-less edible plate of food. Alice has a particularly keen ear for pretension as she insists that her grey gnocchi, which really looks like something that has been coughed up by road works, is an homage to the "charming cobblestone streets of Roma!"

Deb spends three years chopping herbs. Audra considers seeking forgiveness from a nearby pontiff when she realises she has purchased a non-seasonal vegetable and Mindy and Julia-Bot work efficiently in de-bearding a mound of molluscs. Their food story, it appears, is "we went to the fish shop".

Meantime, Andy and Kylie continue to thrash at the lamb-innards as though the poor creature were not already deceased.

As Deb tears herself away from the important work of chopping parsley and considers heating pork in the last few minutes of challenge, it appears that her food story might be "salmonella". Deb is making suppli, the Italian for "surprise!" The surprise is that all who eat her food will soon be dead.

Now, we all understand that food can be evocative of a time and place, but this "food story" stuff is getting a tad too much. One cannot gather a "story" in an afternoon of food shopping that is any more interesting than "I went to the shops". Moreover, it is not the work of dinner to tell us a story. Nonetheless, the book reviewing began!

Judgement of Food Stories commences and it is as though Harold Bloom has entered the body of Ronald McDonald. Audra's story has too many elements and she gets a B-minus for her failure to continue a single narrative. Or something. Of Kylie's lamb a la crime scene Massimo says, "This is not touching my soul". Right o.

No one is sure about the composition of the pork story but are, nonetheless, so genuinely terrified that they declare Deb's raw meatballs an unqualified success.

Great praise is given to Julia V 2.0.3 and Mindy whose engaging story of "we went to the fish shop" seems likely to win the Pulitzer. "You respected the seafood," says George, approving Mindy's decision to give her scallops a cab-fare home.

But the keenest praise is reserved for Alice, who, having previously referenced a proto-existentialist philosopher, can do no wrong in what has become a test of literacy rather than of cooking. Her gnocchi seriously looks like the neglected rocks at the bottom of an ill-tended tropical aquarium. Nonetheless, George calls them "beautiful little stones" and Matt, who is dressed beautifully in a coconut ice ensemble, says, "you told us a story".

"Everybody told a story," agrees Massimo. And everyone was shortlisted for the Man Booker.

I have no idea how anyone will be rewarded for their "storytelling". Don't ask me to explain.

But apparently Alice now has a publishing contract with a small, but elite literary imprimatur where she will write the fascinating story of going to the shops.