

Research Article

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Misterchef? Cooks, Chefs and Gender in *MasterChef Australia*

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Abstract: MasterChef Australia is the most popular television series in Australian history. It gives a wide range of ordinary people the chance to show they can master culinary arts to a professional standard. Through content and textual analysis of seven seasons of the show this article examines gendered patterns in its representation of participants and culinary professionals. Women are often depicted as home cooks by inclination while the figure of the professional chef remains almost exclusively male. Despite its rhetoric of inclusivity, MCA does little to challenge norms of the professional gastronomic field that have devalued women's cooking while valorising "hard" masculinized culinary cultures led by men.

Keywords: MasterChef, reality television, gender

According to Charlotte Druckman "there has always been a strong distinction between the terms cook and chef" [24-25] that presupposes the chef to be male and the cook to be female. Housekeeping has often been seen as the primary social duty of women (Shapiro 12), and domestic cookery has been at the heart of their family caregiving roles under an industrial division of labour that has normalised men's participation in the public sphere and women's work in the home (De Vault). Despite their historical specificity, these roles have been naturalised by notions that men are by disposition hunters or breadwinners, while women are gatherers and nurturers (Meah qtd. in Hopkins and Gorman-Murray 191). In the media this distinction has featured in magazines that advise post-war housewives how to look after the home and cook for family, and in didactic cooking television shows that feature experienced home cooks such as Julia Child (USA), Delia Smith (UK) and Margaret Fulton (Australia) passing on domestic culinary skills through cooking demonstrations (de Solier 469). This longstanding strand of programming validates the "gendered divisions around cooking that remain largely over place and intention: women cook at home for their family and loved ones" (Oren 25). In contrast, professional kitchens have historically been the domain of men, with women entering them being regarded as "invaders" (Williams and Dellinger 60).

Yet Murray (189) proposes that while contemporary television may perpetuate associations between cooking and female domesticity and men's professional public connection with food, much contemporary scholarship emphasises the complication of these received schemas. Elizabeth Fürst (442) argues that increased numbers of male chefs in television home kitchens represents a possible border-crossing of public and private that "legitimizes men's moving closer to the cooking pots" of the domestic sphere. Recent social research appears to confirm that men are spending more time in home cooking, leading to academic debate regarding the extent and nature of a possible "democratisation of domesticity" (Meah and Jackson). It is estimated that postmillennial men in the UK and USA spend twice as much time in the kitchen as their 1960s counterparts (Szabo 623-4). However, women in the same countries still spend twice as much time as men in food preparation and cleaning up. The kind of cooking also varies, with women primarily responsible for day-to-day routine and men tending to cook at weekends, for guests or on special occasions. Cairns, Johnston and Baumann (610) found that involvement in recently popular foodie culture

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allows women and men to rework relationships with food through creative experimentation. However, they also found men to be at greater liberty “to pick and choose how to be a foodie” while women tended to juggle pleasure and care. Through a study of Canadian men who hold day-to-day household cooking responsibilities, Szabo (636) found that the dichotomy that women’s cooking is “work” and men’s “play” is too simplistic. Nonetheless, men also appear to have more freedom from interruptions, negotiations with others and negative emotional associations attaching to foodwork than women with similar duties. There is, however, little indication that gender norms in professional circles have changed significantly. Women hold a small fraction of senior positions in the culinary industry, which is known for its macho culture, and high rates of bullying and sexual harassment in comparison with other employment sectors (Swenson 40).

Given the apparent changes in actual kitchens, it is logical to suppose that they affect a range of cooking media. Today a greater diversity of people can attain celebrity chef or cook status and the days when the home cooking expert was the primary embodiment of food culture on television have long since gone. Food preparation is also represented on TV as entertainment, leisure, adventure, and a professional pursuit. However, Johnston, Rodney & Chong’s study of cookbooks suggests food media is still prone to follow distinct culinary persona types that are highly gendered and racialized. Ketchum’s content analysis of the US Food Network finds four main categories of program, all gendered. Women feature heavily in traditional instructional cooking television, while men are more prominent in entertainment/leisure based cooking shows, avant-garde cooking and gastronomic tourism that combines adventure and food discovery. Many recent genre developments involve enhanced roles for men. However, the last decade or two has also brought changes for female TV cooks with some, such as Nigella Lawson in the UK and Rachael Ray in the USA, directing home cooking towards their own pleasure, even if often in combination with family cooking. This trend has been interpreted as an expression of post-feminist sensibilities that emphasize the idea of women “having it all” by combining domestic effectiveness with personal fulfilment and work. This postfeminist strand suggests the renegotiation of existing gender boundaries within recent food television. However, to what extent might that involve men? Gunders examines an Australian show, *The Cook and the Chef* (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2006-2009), that features cook Maggie Beer and chef Simon Bryant cooking together, with the emphasis on Bryant learning from Beer. This leads Gunders to suggest that it “inverts the binary, privileging the previously devalued term(s) of female, local and domestic.”

This raises broader questions of how concepts of gender might or might not be progressively reconfigured in the televised kitchen. Through role reversal or exchange between genders? Reconstructing or revaluing of traditional associations? Or perhaps creation of new combinations and categories that defy existing classifications? Analysis of recent broader programming trends suggests that increased prominence of men in televised kitchens often comes with a disavowal of feminized cooking (Hollows; Nathanson). New roles for men in food TV result in new gender distinctions through their symbolic sequestration from the domestic kitchen qua site of routine associated with the feminized “work of feeding” (Ketchum; Swenson). Many male chefs appear in forms that do not belong in the domestic home kitchen of everyday routine even if they are sometimes located in that place. These include the uber-skilled, hyper-competitive professional male chef, hedonistic leisure cooks or culinary lifestyle advocates (Swenson). A famous example of the latter is Jamie Oliver, who cooks in and about the home as a social or entertainment activity, or is seen campaigning, experiencing or improving culinary culture in public (Cairns, Johnston and Baumann 594). For Scholes (56) the “revolutionary” self-branding male chef who “continually reasserts his masculinity by never being tied down by his apron strings, by never being stuck in the kitchen” is the flipside of female cooks who stay in the home kitchen. While Jamie Oliver spruiks cooking as creative leisure and food activism as public pedagogy, food preparation for the nuclear family is the most obvious lacuna in his oeuvre.

The archetype of the hyper-masculine professional TV chef is undoubtedly Gordon Ramsey. Holding multiple Michelin stars and an international restaurant business, he acts on screen as a hard-nosed executive who constantly compares the cooking of others to the highest standards, personified by himself. Although few are as hostile as him in asserting culinary standards, such uncompromising authority figures reinforce the brutality of the professional kitchen through their frank judgmental language and commanding presence in media cooking discourses (Higgins et al.; Parry). Ramsey and other male gastronomic leaders, such as Marco Pierre White and Anthony Bourdain, recreate their professional roles as managers of chefs,

while female personalities of similar prominence such as Lawson and Child, do not (Piper 40). This belies the origins of the chef profession in highly drilled and hierarchical military catering brigades of men, but also the fact that modern restaurant kitchens are generally still organised along these lines (Harris and Giuffre, “The Price You Pay” 30). The pedagogy of male chefs tends to reinforce their professional authority. Their leadership role is often expressed in an on-screen chef-to-student model, compared to the everyday reproduction of women’s domestic skills in shows featuring female hosts addressing implicitly female viewers (Swenson 43).

MasterChef Australia

The rise of charismatic and authoritarian male chef leaders has been theorized by some as an expression of hegemonic masculinities that allow for subordination of other gender identities. For Swenson, this is most evident in cooking contests “that place cooking firmly in the public sphere and promote a version of masculinity tied to hierarchy, success, power, speed, and stamina” (49-50). As such, contests uphold hegemonic masculinity, not because women are not involved—they are, but because the ethos of competition functions “to normalize the ‘manly’ nature of professional cooking and to remove cooking from the cooperative ethos of family life” (Swenson 50).

It is with this provocation, and in light of the new range of gender codes present in contemporary food television, that we now turn to an analysis of one of the most successful instances of food television ever: the reality cooking contest, *MasterChef Australia* (MCA). *MasterChef* is a popular reality television format that has been broadcast in over forty different countries. From 2009 to 2015 there were a total of seven MCA seasons produced by Shine Media, with further seasons planned at the time of writing. MCA is the most viewed Australian television series ever with the season one finale averaging an audience of four million viewers (Phillipov 593). *MasterChef* started in the United Kingdom in 1990 hosted by a genteel food critic, Loyd Grossman, who savoured or sniffed at contestants’ creations. Contemporary versions take a talent show form that emphasises competition and the dramatic narratives it generates. It starts with auditions of potential contestants who compete through a cooking challenge, and from there, approximately twenty contestants are chosen to go through to the *MasterChef* kitchen. Week-to-week, contestants collaborate with and compete against each other through militaristic style “pressure tests” and “cook offs” to avoid being eliminated. They also have the opportunity to cook for and against celebrity chefs and for public special occasions in order to test and develop their skills. The eliminations continue throughout the series until one contestant is the winner. He or she gains the title of *MasterChef*, a prize, a publishing deal for a cookbook, and the chance to train with professionals.

MCA bears many hallmarks of reality TV programming. As Hill elaborates, reality television centres upon the unscripted activities of people who nominally act as themselves in a range of scenarios. It is, therefore, “located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama” (Hill 2005, 2) and viewers tune in to see how “reality” unfolds. Close tracking of the fortunes of under-pressure participants placed together in a competition is key to reality contest shows such as *Survivor* or *Big Brother* and also applies to reality talent shows like MCA. In later rounds, the amateur cooks not only work side-by-side in the cavernous *MasterChef* kitchen and undertake various field tasks together. They are also filmed living together in a large share house, ratcheting up the intensity of the tension as we see them prepare, worry, relax and socialise with their opponents.

Of course, it is by now a commonplace idea that reality TV is “anything but real” (Weber 4). In particular, reality talent show formats supply a generic narrative structure for each contestant to develop in their own way—that of the dream to succeed in an area of the entertainment and leisure industries as validated by experts from the field. As such they are there to be transformed, be the one who can learn the required norms and effect their own makeover so as to cross over from ordinariness to the extraordinary realm inhabited by the celebrity professionals who judge them (Redden). In the case of MCA, that involves the guidance of three principal celebrity judges and numerous guest experts who both teach and test participants in their bids to join the ranks of elite professional cooking that the experts embody.

The constructedness of reality scenarios ensures that participants are often divided into “types” amenable to the kind of spectacle to be engendered. Indeed, producers sometimes cast contestants precisely because they satisfy a stereotype (Denham and Jones 80). Beverly Skeggs (639) argues that “on reality television it is not the story that comes to the viewer pre-packaged but the participant, entering the event already value-loaded, their moral subject-positions highly circumscribed, cast to fulfil specific criteria.” Leigh Edwards concurs when she notes that “gender emerges in reality programming as a set of generic conventions” that allow transgression and reassertion of gender role expectations. Some shows depend upon explicit gender types such as good or bad housewives (*Wife Swap*), rugged alpha males (*Man vs. Wild*), or attractive heterosexuals (*The Bachelor/Bachelorette*). Whether they are presented for celebration, subversion or mockery, “the point here is that mediated messages often carry gendered valences about the relative value of identities” (Weber 2).

MCA is reasonably gender-balanced when it comes to participant numbers, except in season seven where a clear majority are women (see *Table 1*). This is consistent with the rhetoric of opportunity that accompanies a population-wide search for talent. The gender balance is accompanied by relative ethnic and class diversity. Lewis (113) notes how *MCA* has “portrayed the *MasterChef* kitchen as a space of egalitarianism” through its “inclusive cross-class mode of address.” Yet she also argues that middle-class forms of cultural capital are subtly valued on the show, not by explicitly verbalising classed preferences, but through the framing of contestants’ personas and skills as they work towards mastering middle-class culinary forms (Lewis 114).

Table 1: Number of female and male contestants in *MCA*

Season	Male Contestants	Female contestants
One	10	10
Two	13	11
Three	13	11
Four	10	14
Five	11	11
Six	10	14
Seven	9	15

The remainder of this article combines content analysis and textual analysis of illustrative moments of *MCA* to question the apparent gender neutrality of the show in light of current research regarding gender representations in food television. If gender codes are present, what are they and how might they be interpreted? What might they tell us about broader relationships between food preparation and gender, whether in the home or professional kitchen? Does the search for new culinary talent suggest a significant reimagining of the latter?

The *MasterChef* corpus no doubt includes a range of representations of men and women that cannot be captured here in its full depth, breadth and complexity. The show airs several times a week, with each season comprising over 70 episodes. However, content analysis can count the instances of key representations to highlight their prevalence, and the framing of characters across all seven seasons can reveal significant patterns in gendered representations of personhood. The aim here is to ascertain the main trends in the presentation of the culinary experts and the amateur cooks who populate its kitchen worlds. The next section examines gendered depictions of expert chefs who appear as representatives of contemporary professional gastronomy. Then the attention turns to the ways that contestants are presented through gendered categories. As the overall transformation narrative involves ordinary amateur cooks interacting with professionals, this approach is intended to both reveal what kinds of personhood are seen to have value in professional circles and how “ordinary people” from the broader community are enrolled into discourses about gender and food.

Experts, Chefs and Cooks in *MasterChef*

Gary Mehigan, George Calombaris and Matt Preston make up the permanent judging panel of *MCA*. Apart from some deviations and additions over the seven seasons, they remain the core decision makers regarding who gets eliminated from the series. Gary and George are both professional chefs who run multiple restaurants, while Matt Preston is a prominent food critic. Season one of *MCA* included a female host, Sarah Wilson. However, she was left out of later seasons after the producers felt the show could be adequately hosted by the three judges.

The composition of the team of permanent judges affirms links between male experts, gourmet restaurants and the higher levels of the professional hierarchy. This is not to say that the permanent judges represent the excessive tooth and claw masculinity of a Gordon Ramsey or communicate with unsympathetic brutality. Monika Bednarek (108) argues that Gary, George and Matt concentrate on positive emotions ensuring that the show “does not limit itself to negative emotionality and conflict.” However, although the permanent male judges of *MCA* are generally supportive—more likely to commiserate with than denigrate failing contestants—ultimately this does not change the underlying structure of competitive display. It perhaps infuses it with distinctly Australian sentiments of “mateship” (Lewis 107). While judges help contestants get through the emotional stresses of the high pressure they are also the ones who dispatch all who fail to make the grade. During elimination challenges, the *MCA* warehouse kitchen is transformed into a gladiatorial style arena. As with other talent shows, ultimately all tests are about reaching tough professional standards as verified through appropriate experts. Along these lines, Nancy Lee (88) argues that *MasterChef* can be seen as an example of how “Masculinities are defined collectively in culture, and are sustained in institutions.” Combining her analysis with ethnographic work among chefs she notes how, despite the supportive hosts, the *MCA* kitchen is infused with the hegemonic masculinity of the “hard kitchens” that require the “display of masculine stoicism” in the face of pressure. The format of the show acts as a “rendition of the brigade formed by the four judges and the contestants, in which the judges hold hegemonic positions and the contestants learn under them” (Lee 97).

Alongside the three main judges, a plethora of chefs and cooks feature as guests who set challenges for the contestants and rate their performances. As Table 2 shows, however, there is a significant disparity between male and female guest appearances. The total number of men invited onto *MCA* across seven seasons is 169 compared to only 38 women (see Table 3). More significant are the identities conferred upon the guests. Male guests are overwhelmingly identified as chefs, with the exceptions of nine previous contestants, one cheese connoisseur, one baker, the CEO of Qantas, the CEO of Cooking for a Cause, Matt Moran’s father, the Dalai Lama, and Gregg Wallace, one food critic, Eamon Sullivan (Olympic swimmer and winner of *MasterChef All Stars*), a Baptist Minister, a Reverend, a judge from *MasterChef* in the UK. Notably, these men who are not chefs, do not contradict the association between men and professional gourmet kitchens. None of them are “cooks” concerned with domestic food preparation in the home. As Cruz notes, certain cooking styles such as baking and salad preparation have become feminized (Cruz 329). Yet the male guest baker is a professional specializing in bread rather than home baking or baking of cakes.

Table 2: Celebrity guest appearances per season, seasons 1-7. (Some guests appear in multiple episodes and seasons.)

Season	All guests	Male guests	Female Guests
One	22	19	3
Two	63	52	11
Three	97	81	16
Four	42	33	9
Five	23	19	4
Six	24	18	6
Seven	32	25	7
Total	303	247	56

When compared with the female guests a clear polarization exists. Seven of the thirty-eight female guests have been described on the show as cooks. The remainder have consisted of thirteen head chefs, seven pastry and dessert chefs, one baker, one chocolatier, one sugar artist and designer, six previous contestants, one food critic, and George Calombaris's mother. Clearly, a notable proportion of chefs are specialists (*chef de partie*) in the feminised domain of desserts, and a number of female experts take on the traditional persona of the home cook. The cook is an exclusively female culinary persona among *MCA* celebrity and expert visitors. This reinforces the association between women and domestic kitchens. Over all seasons women identified as professional chefs—who share knowledge of how restaurant kitchens work and judge contestants by their standards—make up under 10% of all guests. Perhaps most importantly, numbers of female head chefs (*chef de cuisine*)—culinary leaders who run kitchens—are so low that they function as an exotic exception. In contrast, head chef is the normal role of male guests.

Table 3: Total numbers of celebrity guests by category, seasons 1-7

All male guests	169	All female guests	38
Male chefs	148	Female chefs	20
Male cooks	0	Female cooks	7
Male other	21	Female other	11

The inclusion of Mary Calombaris (George's mother, S03E44 & S03E48) helps to highlight the traditional inscriptions of women as home cooks, and this is just one instance of a "cooking mother" motif that sees people recall the influence of mothers over their cooking on the show. Cairns, Johnson and Baumann see repeated references to foodie's mothers as "evidence of the enduring positive social evaluations of mothers as providers of care through food. By reiterating this connection between mothers and food, foodies reconstitute a discourse linking femininity with food socialisation" (Cairns, Johnston and Baumann 602). Further developing these ideas are the "MasterClasses" that feature Maggie Beer, one of the motherly female "cooks" on the show introduced as "Australia's home cooking queen" (S06E09). Masterclasses are more relaxed segments, where chefs or cooks come into the *MCA* kitchen to informally educate the contestants (and audience) in culinary skills and cooking cuisines. Maggie Beer affirms the split of private/public, feminine/masculine binaries when she is the only guest to present hers (S03E6 & S05E09) from her home kitchen instead of the normal *MCA* kitchen. Lee (103-108) highlights how differently gendered personas drive drama and affective responses. When Marco Pierre White appears to awe struck contestants (S03E58) he is referred to as "the godfather of modern cooking" and is seen to embody successful handling of the pressures of elite performance. He exudes calm authority by giving out terse instructions before he later yells orders during service. However, when Maggie Beer appears she is a kind maternal figure whose presence resolves the previously tense atmosphere. While her cook persona is positively valued, Lee argues this comes at the symbolic cost that she is distanced "from the brigade, and therefore the associated prestige and successes of professional cheffing" (103).

While female guests are occasionally invited to judge in the finals week of *MCA* (Donna Hay in season one, Maggie Beer in season two, and Kylie Kwong in season three), we see few women validating skills of contestants by acting as guest judges, a role which is normal for men. Two of these female finals judges: Maggie Beer and Donna Hay, judge explicitly as cooks by standards of home cooking and suitability of dishes for cookbooks (S03E81; S01E70). Although male chef Curtis Stone also appears as a judge in a similar task (S03E79), he is the single man to do so across seasons, and the task ends with the chosen dish being "recipe tested" by four female home cooks. In short, on the rare occasions women judge the quality of the dishes produced by contestants, they are depicted as experts in home cooking (the exception of Kylie will be mentioned later), unlike male chefs, who generally judge whether the food could be served in top restaurants. Their lack of involvement in finals week judging

of whether food meets elite professional standards sees the few female experts called upon in the show symbolically excluded from the most prestigious cadre of elite culinary leaders.

Gendering Contestants

All in all the characterizations of food experts on *MCA* reinforce ideas that feminine cooking takes place in the home, while professional cooking is a male preserve. However, as previously noted there is a gender balance among contestants in the show (see *Table 1*).

To ascertain whether the contestants are characterized along gender lines the introduction segments—short clips of each contestant that are played during the opening sequence of each episode of *MCA*—were analyzed. These important visual narratives construct each participant's identity, usually through display of them undertaking a culinary activity. Introduction types that apply to only one contestant have been excluded from the analysis. They include activities as diverse as weighing spices, stirring, straining, removing a lid and arranging a napkin. Categories in which multiple contestants feature are summarized in *Table 4*.

Notably, most introductions participate in gendered codes in some way despite participants' involvement in the same activities in the contest. As *Table 4* shows, common ways of presenting overwhelmingly embodied as male or female. The preparation of fruit and vegetables, although more feminized, is the only category that comes close to gender balance as it includes fourteen women and five men across the seven seasons. Four other categories comprise over 80% of one gender, and the remaining five are exclusive to a gender.

Women are strongly associated with desserts and offering final dishes to others or the camera. Many are seen holding cakes (Figure 1) tasting their food with their fingers, blowing out candles on cakes, creating salads, holding fruits, and partaking in other activities that are culturally coded as feminine, such as smelling a zucchini flower in one of the unique introductions (Julia in season one, not listed in the table). When women are presenting dishes the foods are often arranged ready for others to eat in domestic dining settings. Women are more often seen sitting as though ready to share the meal, literally serving food, or dressing it for visual appeal (Figure 2). These introductions associate femininity with connotations of delicacy and sweetness, and with the ornamentation side of food preparation.



Figure 1. Female contestants pictured with desserts in their introduction segments

Table 4: Activities of contestants in the introduction segments of MCA

Activities of contestants in introduction segments	Female Contestants	Male Contestants
With desserts	Season 1: Linda Season 2: Joanne, Fiona Season 3: Arena, Alana, Kate, Rachel Season 4: Julia, Kylie, Audra Season 5: Pip, Faiza Season 6: Amy, Georgia, Tash, Emilia Season 7: Georgia, Billie	Season 2: Alvin Season 6: Nick
Presenting food to others/to camera	Season 1: Geni Season 2: Fiona, Marion Season 3: Shannon, Dani Season 4: Amina, Tregan, TK, Jules Season 5: Christina, Liliana Samira Season 6: Sarah, Emelia, Georgia, Emily	Season 2: Dominic Season 3: Ben Season 5: Rishi
Tasting or smelling food	Season 1: Kate, Julie Season 2: Joanne Season 4: Debra, Emma, Davinder, Audra Season 5: Neha	
Preparing/presenting Fruits or Vegetables	Season 1: Michelle C, Poh Season 2: Sharnee, Skye Season 3: Chelsea, Cleo, Ellie Season 4: Mindy, Alice, Kath Season 6: Laura, Kira, Renae, Nicole, Emily Season 7: Sara	Season 1: Brent Season 2: Adam, Callum Season 3: Seamus Season 4: Matt
Sharpening Knives		Season 1: Andre Season 2: Daniel
Preparing Red Meat		Season 1: Chris Season 2: Phillip, Devon Season 3: Andrew Season 4: Sam Season 5: Xavier Season 6: Brent Season 7: Matthew
Preparing Seafood	Season 2: Sarah Season 6: Emily	Season 1: Josh Season 2: Jake Season 3: Adam Season 4: Andy, Wade
Cooking with alcohol/making wine	Season 5: Clarissa	Season 3: Tom Season 4: Mario Season 5: Vern Season 6: Colin
Cooking with Fire		Season 1: Sam Season 3: Billy, Jay Season 6: Byron, Brendan, Scott
Standing with arms folded		Season 2: Matthew Season 3: Alex Season 4: Kevin Season 7: Reynold



Figure 2. Female contestants presenting food to the camera or serving other contestants in introduction segments

While the principal visual language of introductions confirms the idea women enjoy cooking for others, the representation of contestants tasting or smelling their food mirrors Hollows' idea that women can cook for the self. Women hereby appear involved in the contradictory discourses of cooking for the pleasure of others and cooking for the self. However, this suggestion has been avoided for male contestants as no men taste their own food.

Men are more often presented in stripped back utilitarian work settings and are often engaged in the serious labour or physical fun of preparing animal food, or cooking or consuming it. While a few men offer food to others in these segments, they are offering meat to the camera, which protects their masculinity, as meat is considered a symbol of dominance through the overpowering of animals. The men in these segments are often seen to have a strong, aggressive standing stance. This is reinforced by connotations of danger associated with cooking with fire, and the multiple displays of men sharpening knives, carving red meat (Figure 3) or purely standing with their arms crossed in an assertive stance.



Figure 3. Male contestants handling red meat in introduction segments

Meanwhile, the association with alcohol in pouring or making wine adds a note of hedonistic enjoyment in some of the introductions of the men. While some segments diverge from these physically assertive or hedonistic norms, such as Nic (S01) whisking and Craig setting a tablecloth (S03), they function as exceptions to the rule of male strength and power. They could be viewed as subordinated male positions that can act to define hegemonic masculinity through reproducing feminised food preparation tasks (Flood et al., 2007, 254). Furthermore men displaying less overtly masculine traits such as Lucas (S01) juggling eggs, Tom (S01) tossing flour, and Phillip (S02) flipping dough, emphasize that cooking is an entertaining activity, adhering to the common notion that men cook for leisure (Ketchum; Hyman; Higgins et al.; Oren).

The absence of women carving meat, sharpening knives, or playing with fire in any introductions suggests particular discursive limits are placed upon genders. According to Flood, Pease and Pringle the emphasis of men and meat can be traced to the idea of “Man the Hunter,” which is a “central metaphor in the construction of masculinities” that justifies assertive male behavior (Flood et al. 2007, 321). The connections between men and meat and women and desserts are developed across the shows in a range of ways. For instance, an “invention test” in S02E42 required the contestants to create a vegetarian dish to impress “six staunch meat-eaters” and the male judges. The six dedicated carnivores are male and have physical occupations that are stereotypically masculine: a cattle farmer, two truck drivers, a fire officer and two builders. Farmer Lachlan is asked to tell the contestants his favourite vegetable, to which he replies: “my favorite vegetable is in fact the rump steak.” When George asks builder Ryan “what’s your view on vegetarian food?” he notes that it is “very hard to work long hours with a stomach full of broccoli.” Meanwhile, an offsite challenge required contestants to bake traditional afternoon tea cakes (S02E63). This was judged by members of the Women’s Country Association. To further emphasise the connection between women and desserts, one pressure test (S04E50) was to recreate chef Vincent Gadan’s “Essence of a Woman.” Shaped like a perfume bottle, made from chocolate and decorated with intricate crystalised violets it reinforces links between presentation, sweet desserts and the “delicacy” of women.

Overall, although a handful of introductions do not obey the apparent rules, almost all of the others reinforce gender codes already noted in the food and media literature, and they do so in a binarizing way that suggests little crossover or blurring of categories. Apparent exceptions can also reveal the underlying gender norms. The only women presenting seafood are Sarah and Emily. However, they do so in a way that contrasts with the men in the same category. Sarah is cooking fish and nudges it with tongs, while Emily dresses a cooked fish with salad at the presentational stage of preparation. This is compared to hands-on style of the male contestants grappling raw seafood (Figure 4). Among the men featuring in categories



Figure 4. Male contestants holding or presenting raw seafood in introduction segments

dominated by women, three of the vegetable choppers stand out from “normal” chopping. Seamus is actually shown holding the knife up to the camera after cutting vegetables (S03), while Brent (S01) and Matt (S04) stoically cut onions, the suggestion being that cutting onions does not make them cry. Of the two men appearing with desserts, one, Alvin (S02) is openly gay. The other, Nick (S06) goes on to be constructed as a caring young domestic male whose sexuality is not identified but whose narrative emphasizes that he grew up close to his mother and grandmother, is obsessed with desserts and names female celebrity cooks as his heroes. Nominally this is a deviation from norms, though one that is compatible with the logic of the show through his symbolic feminization.

Discussion

This article has examined how *MCA* portrays women and men in relation to culinary practices. The framing of characters across seasons largely recreates gendered patterns noted by others in the food and media literature. Yet the framework of the show is not explicitly gendered as male or female overall. The oppositions between men and women presented seem at odds with official gender neutrality that sees roughly even numbers of male and female contestants and winners. Men are often depicted as leisure cooks and people who take on the aggressive tasks of preparing raw meat and seafood, with additional emphasis on knives, cutting flesh and fire. Women, however, are often associated with fruit and vegetables, desserts and the dressing of final dishes. They are depicted presenting food to others or the camera, and unlike the men, several are shown enjoying their own food through tasting or smelling. These ways of representing convey associations that women cook for the care of others, or for their own sensory pleasure. Regarding experts, women have no presence in the permanent judging panel, make up a small proportion of the chefs who are invited to take part and have no involvement in judging in finals weeks until Kylie Kwong in season six. Furthermore, a significant number of those who are chefs are called upon to guide contestants through the feminised professional niche of pastry. Another significant subgroup of women experts are the “cooks” who are occasionally invited onto the show as guests specializing in home food preparation. Male guest experts, who make up the vast majority, are overwhelmingly head chefs presented as professional leaders.

Of course, given the scale of the *MCA* corpus, it was not possible to analyse all aspects of the show that may be gendered, and it is possible that, beyond the patterns of prevalence that content analysis demonstrates, counterexamples or further layers of complexity exist. At the same time, exceptions may not always subvert gender codes they deviate from. For instance, regular guest, dessert chef Adriano Zumbo, is associated with a food category that is often feminized on *MCA*. Yet he is also billed as “The Dark Lord of Pastry” because of his reversal of such “sweet” feminized associations. He is among the most exacting and relentless male chefs featured. Furthermore, as Acker (61) notes “focusing on one category (e.g. gender) almost inevitably obscures and oversimplifies other interpenetrating realities.” The gender patterns in question also seem to vary with race and ethnicity. While the analysis given is not enough to sustain generalizations about the portrayal of race in *MCA*, it does suggest that depicted gender norms intersect with and are shaped with other identity categories, including race. Typical nurturing “home cook” figures are middle-class heterosexual Anglo-Australian women such as Maggie Beer or contestant Julie Goodwin. Guest chef Kylie Kwong and contestant Poh Ling Yeow (S01), who both have Chinese Malaysian backgrounds, are figures of similar prominence in the history of the show but are depicted with more assertive qualities closer to the “hard kitchen” masculinity of white male chefs.

Poh’s ethnicity is utilised by *MCA* to construct her through a distinctively Asian categorisation. The digression from generic introductions is evident in her introduction segment. She appears more aggressive than other women as she is depicted forcefully chopping a pineapple with a cleaver. This persona is reminiscent of the fierce “Dragon Lady” stereotype of Chinese women that continues to appear in contemporary screen cultures (Shah 2003) and is reinforced through her facial expression of “staring down” the camera (Figure 5). This is contrary to the representations of other women seen smiling pleasantly. Yet, at the same time, Poh chops fruit, not meat, which is preserved as a symbol of white masculinity in introductions. Kwong’s depiction is also distinctive. She is the only female Asian chef across seasons (apart

from pastry chef Cherish Finden, S02E54) and is presented as both chef and restaurateur, unlike other women. However, unlike male chefs, she often references her cultural background and related domestic culinary experiences and is almost exclusively seen judging or teaching contestants about Asian cuisines. She often wears loose black top and black pants with long hair slicked back behind her ears in a “gender-neutral” way. Although she is more supportive and emotional outside the kitchen, when supervising cooks Kwong is shown as tough and demanding. She often acts like a drill sergeant shouting orders and reinforcing time pressure, for instance in S03E67, where she guides contestants in cooking for the Dalai Lama, and in S04E64 where they have to “Keep up with Kylie” by copying her rapid preparation of a Chinese dish. In S06E04 Kylie is billed as the contestants’ worst nightmare as “mastermind” of the show’s “biggest elimination challenge ever” in a Chinese cuisine special comprising “three rounds of kitchen hell” that see her refuse to eat the dish of the loser.



Figure 5. Poh Ling Yeow introduction segment

However, the association of Kylie with Asian cuisine (an association also applied to 11 of the 12 Asian male chefs who feature across seasons) reproduces the idea that racial-ethnic minorities belong outside traditional culinary hierarchies and high-end cuisine (Ray). Thus the anomalous gendering of Asian women seems less about their admission to the “brigade” of elite male chefs per se, and thus a destabilising of the gendered culinary norms evident across the show, than a reinforcement of the whiteness of those norms. While some of the gender coding speaks of more recent culinary change—male contestants presented as leisure cooks or women as cooking for their own pleasure, representations that consistently code men as chefs with leadership qualities and women as cooks with caring qualities remain striking discursive patterns. Clearly, one could argue that the reiteration of gendered culinary stereotypes is suggestive of politically contestable ideas that women are nurturers, belong in the home, or are concerned with beautification. As Druckman (28) notes “the problem isn’t lack of airtime” that women have on cooking television, “it’s the quality of that time and the way they are portrayed: as cooks, not as chefs: as pretty faces who do easy meals for families or casual parties.”

At the same time, it is too easy to simply denounce *MCA* for irredeemably conservative gender representation. The reality talent format of the show nominally accords anyone the same opportunity to transform themselves from amateur cook to someone worthy of professional recognition. In these terms,

MCA could be viewed as the extant male culinary establishment conceding to the involvement of women at a time of change in both food media and broader food cultures. When challenged to justify season five's retro "boy-versus-girls" theme judge Gary Mehigan notes that it is tongue-in-cheek fun aimed only at increasing the drama and that the character who most resembles a 1950s housewife is a lesbian parent. He stresses how important women are in the contemporary culinary industry, including in his own gender-balanced restaurant kitchens, and suggests that "The days of the angry, aggressive, male-dominated kitchens are over" (McManus). Along these lines, it could be argued that the way *MCA* articulates traditional gender associations with possibilities of democratization in the professional food scene destabilizes those traditional understandings even while it "references" them. This might be to acknowledge that hegemonic gender relations themselves are historical, not essential—both in the forms of gender codes that shape understanding (De Lauretis) and the performances that entrench particular forms of men's institutional power (Connell and Messerschmidt).

Yet, if that is the case, it is also necessary to question the *extent* to which *MCA* may destabilize gender norms. Hegemonic masculinity theory also emphasizes that institutions may marginalize alternatives and maintain the cultural consent necessary for hierarchy, even if the latter is adapted into new forms in the face of social and cultural change (Connell and Messerschmidt). It is fundamental that *MCA*, despite its meritocratic rhetoric, does still depict professional kitchens as a mainly male domain and the leaders of the restaurant industry as men. While women may win a season for being good cooks, they do not actually make it into the restaurant industry. Nothing here really unsettles the idea that professional cheffing is a male preserve such that women workers commonly feel "the only way to gain legitimacy as a food force is by hiding all traces of femininity" (Druckman 29).

In their recent book-length study based on interviews with women in the industry and analysis of food media, Harris and Giuffre argue that gender disparities in the gastronomic field continue to be sustained by the gendered "rules of the game" that valorize men's ways of doing things (Harris and Giuffre 2015). They seek to shed light on the paradox that chef careers are of great interest to contemporary women, but few who start out at catering school progress to higher levels, and many move out of restaurant work into other areas of catering. They find that gendered concepts regarding the "ideal person for the job" and the (male) nature of culinary greatness and leadership circulate not only in the profession but also its allied media such as food criticism and awards. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, they propose that gender codes that align culinary prestige with masculinity very much define the actual forms of cultural capital valued in the practices of professional gastronomy.

Although women respondents reported facing fewer blatantly aggressive male chefs than in the past, women still congregate in internal silos such as pastry, while respondents seeking to make it up the chef ladder recounted how they are often placed into the pantry section to undertake feminized roles such as salad and cold appetizer preparation (Harris and Giuffre, *Taking the Heat* 99). While the book highlights how successful women progress in the industry and the specific strategies necessary to fit in, women's high drop-out rate was, perhaps unsurprisingly, largely attributed to the conflict between their roles as family carers and the unforgiving environment of the restaurant kitchen. Yet ultimately, this is not just about women getting by in male-oriented industries. Key to Harris and Giuffre's argument is that the gastronomic field involves a distinctive challenge that does not apply to women attempting to fit into other "tough" male-dominated careers. It is that since its formation from the all-male military brigade, the prestige of the high-end culinary world has precisely been purposely built up through contrasts with unpaid and low paid feminised food work that are seen as expressions of care. The legitimacy and relatively higher pay of the fine dining chef profession have been borne of boundary work emphasising its masculinized difference from feminized home food preparation and other catering roles.

Although women are invited to "have a go"—and in the last season analysed (seven) they are two women for every man—little in *MCA* deeply challenges the idea that a top restaurant kitchen is a hard, hot, tough place suited to men. The show's inclusiveness does not extend to rethinking the terms upon which men and women can participate in the industry. The latter is precisely what Harris and Giuffre argue is needed to allow women to progress more easily, and it requires deliberate workplace policies and initiatives of gender integration. They propose that meritocratic rhetoric that stresses equality of opportunity in the

contemporary creative industries too easily suggests that anyone can make it in occupations where the markers of talent are gendered (Harris and Giuffre, *Taking the Heat* 192). In these terms, *MCA* could be viewed as male gatekeepers of the homosocial world of the elite culinary industry making *gestures* of inclusion through the generic conventions of reality talent television, while character types of contestants reinforce fundamental ideas that women cook for care. It is in these terms that a figure like Julie can be valued as a home cook, and indeed gain some real economic benefits in becoming a home cooking media celebrity, but with the proviso that the qualities that allow her to do so are not transferable to a world of Michelin stars.

When applied to the quasi-symbolic, quasi-real kitchens of food media, these issues beg continued questioning of the terms in which people and food are mediated, not only to expose gendered power blocs but to note some of the ironies and complexities of change. As distinctive ways of imagining women and men in the kitchen develop in contemporary food media—such as those depicting women deriving pleasure from food, or those inscribing men's culinary practices as adventure—it becomes harder than ever to simply identify good and bad images or correct ways of representing. There certainly needs to be room enough for mothers who are amazing cooks if that does not signify all that mothers can and should be. However, as changes in food cultures and related forms of power are uneven, we can follow the lead of Rebecca Swenson (52) who advocates food media take a role in further scrambling of the codes that associate people with specific culinary tastes, abilities and inclinations by gender. In this vision she sees macho chefs providing weeknight dinner solutions or guiding their sons in vegetarian recipes, while female food scientists could put an even harder edge on scientific gastronomy. The hints of kindness and support expressed by the male *MCA* hosts signify potential, as does the diverse range of contestants involved. However, should it allow women chefs to be more than occasional spice and further mix up gender distinctions, *MCA* could also play a role in altering cultural norms of the gastronomic field. What better vehicle could there be for making normal the expectation that women belong at the top of a global food preparation enterprise they otherwise dominate than the most popular television series in Australian history?

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