

What's cooking?

Donna Hay chats to writer Joanne Hawkins about 20 years in Australian food trends



WHAT WERE YOU DOING 20 YEARS AGO? I was just about to start my career, working in magazine test kitchens, and was so excited to be surrounded by creative cooks and photographers.

HAS YOUR COOKING PHILOSOPHY CHANGED SINCE THEN? My mantra has always been to make cooking fast, fresh and simple. I also love taking the hard work out of things – all the wow, without the work, as I like to say!

WHAT WAS YOUR COOKING LIGHT-BULB MOMENT? It was watching my grandmother bake – she was the one who ignited my interest in cooking. I used to sit on the kitchen bench as she made cakes, puddings and scones. I still make her Christmas pudding exactly the same as she did.

HOW HAVE COOKING STYLES CHANGED IN THE PAST TWO DECADES? Just like fashion, music and style, our cooking habits have changed as well. Convenience has played a large part in this as people look for quick and easy meal solutions. And our closeness to Asia and access to spices, ingredients and produce from that area has meant our cooking style has evolved to reflect that, for example, the stir-fry is now one of Australia's most popular weeknight dishes.

HOW HAVE AUSTRALIAN PALATES CHANGED? Generations of immigration have left Aussies with pretty advanced palates and open minds. There's also been a shift towards Middle Eastern flavours. It's not unusual these days for us to have za'atar, sumac and tahini in our pantries.

WHAT IMPACT HAS GROWING-YOUR-OWN HAD ON HOME COOKING? I think most of us are in love with the romance of growing our own produce, but the reality is that unless you have a big garden, it's hard to supplement your cooking with home-grown vegies all the

time. The movement has been an important educational tool for children on where their food comes from, especially through garden initiatives at schools. I know my boys get super excited about harvesting our own tomatoes and snow peas every chance they get.

IS HOME COOKING MORE POPULAR THAN IT WAS 20 YEARS AGO? I'm not sure that it is – there was a big shift to convenience foods and eating out in restaurants for quite some time. It's only in the past five years that the effect of TV cooking shows like *MasterChef* have seen people getting back into their kitchens.

WHAT ARE THE LATEST 'IN' INGREDIENTS? There's been a huge push for quinoa, kale and brussels sprouts in the past year, and salted caramel has been popular for more than two years.

HOW DO THOSE INGREDIENTS COMPARE TO WHAT WAS 'IN' 20 YEARS AGO? Remember the sundried tomato? That was a huge ingredient in the early 1990s! It was in everything. Focaccia was also the trend in cafes all over the country, and pesto, tapenade and marinated vegetables were everywhere, too.

WHAT DETERMINES WHICH INGREDIENTS AND FOOD TRENDS ARE POPULAR? They are driven by several factors, from the producers and farmers, to chefs, restaurants, television shows, magazines and supermarkets who pioneer new trends and broader access to ingredients.

YOUR PREDICTION FOR THE NEXT BIG THING IN COOKING? I think people will continue to be more engaged in where their food comes from and cook accordingly – cooking at home with whole grains, organic food and local food. Superfoods are increasingly making their way into home cooking, too.

HAS THE WAY WE ENTERTAIN CHANGED IN THE PAST TWO DECADES? For a while the word 'entertain' became a bit too scary. People were daunted by not only hosting a dinner party but also attending one. A more relaxed approach has evolved. Rather than plating up three courses, it's now about shared platters down the middle of the table where everyone can help themselves – a far easier and more relaxing way to entertain.

HOW MUCH OF A ROLE HAVE YOU PLAYED IN THE INTEREST IN COOKING IN AUSTRALIA? I've been lucky that my simple, yet flavoursome approach to working with fresh produce, pantry staples and shortcuts has resonated with people. I tend to cook the way most busy families do and my books and the magazine have always catered to that. It's about being approachable, realistic and encouraging.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE KITCHEN GADGET? I can't live without my kitchen stand mixer for baking, making meringue, dough and more. It's been the one constant in my life.

ANY TIPS FOR NERVOUS COOKS? Don't overstretch yourself. Start with the basics and the favourite dishes you enjoy and work your way up from there.

FINALLY, DO YOU STILL BELIEVE ANYONE CAN LEARN HOW TO COOK? I believe that anyone can learn to cook if they really want to. ■

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Donna Hay is a best-selling cookbook author, magazine editor, TV presenter and mother of two.