



This celebrity chef has never forgotten her humble beginnings, writes **Julie Hosking**.

Little Monica Fa'afiti would hang around her uncles as they lorded over the fire, hoping to score her favourite treat. "The uncles used to pick a ripe banana and then they'd wrap it in banana leaf and bake it, I loved that," she recalls. "I used to hang around every time they used to do what they call an umu, which is like a big fire pit they used to roast pigs and that sort of thing, just to make sure I got a banana."

It was as a little girl in Western Samoa that she was also taught how to prepare green bananas. "You make a special peeler, out of wood, to peel the green off, and it's quite an amazing skill to be able to do it without breaking or chipping it."

Monica Galetti, protegee of UK cooking legend Michel Roux junior and now a celebrity chef in her own right, clearly savours those early memories, though of course she didn't know at the time they would stand her in such good stead. "You're just enjoying life as you know it, aren't you?"

What she didn't enjoy was being ripped from the laid-back island lifestyle – where she would run barefoot through the plantations near her home, picking fresh guava and papaya – and taken to New Zealand, where her parents were already living with two of her four siblings, her mum working in telecommunications, her dad as a mechanic, to send money back to Samoa.

Mere magic

"I found it so cold, Auckland first and then we moved to Wellington. It was a bit of a shock to the system. And of course having to learn a new language. We spoke Samoan in the islands, back then, this is early 80s ... we learnt how to say hello and goodbye (in English), that was it," she recalls.

The 43-year-old remembers feeling really lost, though having older brothers who could already speak English helped cushion the blow. And she soon came to realise the decision was all about ensuring a better life for their children. "As a child you don't know anything is wrong. What better life could you have than running around? And not having to put on shoes!" She lets out a huge laugh.

Having watched the formidable chef dispense advice on the UK's MasterChef: The Professionals, a

gig she's been doing for 10 years – "Can you write to the BBC and ask where my gold watch is?" – I confess I hadn't expected her to be so warm. And funny. It becomes evident that while Monica takes her job very seriously, she doesn't take herself seriously.

But the talented chef is also clearly incredibly disciplined and focused. How else would she have survived so many years in the kitchen of Roux's celebrated two-Michelin star Le Gavroche, working her way up from lowly first commis to become the first female senior sous chef. Or found the wherewithal to open her own restaurant, Mere – French for mother, it's also Samoan for Mary and her late mother's name – in hyper-competitive London with husband David Galetti.

A self-confessed control freak, she describes herself as tough but fair. "I'm sure my guys think 'Oh my God, here she is', because all I seem to do is nag but it's a good thing for them to know that standards have to be met no matter what. And it's everything, from a tissue on the floor to dumping their shoes in the middle of the staffroom. It's how I was trained ... you care about everything, not just what is happening on your bench."

While this attention to detail was honed at Le Gavroche, one of Monica's first and most important teachers was her mother. "Mum was a great cook, she always knew how to stretch ingredients to make things work and get a meal for a family of seven, if you can imagine," she says. "She used to do these lamb bellies, she used to stuff them, roll them and braise them, oh, it was amazing. Pour gravy over the top. And Mum used to make fantastic Samoan chow mein, a bit like a stir-fry."

It was Mere who also taught her daughter how to cook abalone, not something in most young chefs' skill set, let alone a child's. "In our culture the girls are taught to cook from a young age, they're always made to be responsible for feeding the family."

Although she enjoyed cooking, Monica said it wasn't until she stepped into a commercial kitchen for her hospitality course that she knew she had found her place. It helped that she also had wanderlust. "Hospitality for me was about getting to travel as well, that was a huge attraction," she says. Having honed her skills at a Lower Hutt restaurant whose owner encouraged her to enter cooking competitions around the world, the ambitious chef always had her eye on the top end of her profession. "I sent my CV out when I left NZ and Michel was the first to reply ... I thought it would be back in Australia or somewhere in the south of France." It was 1997, and she envisaged she'd stay long enough to boost her CV, and then return home.

Although she did go back to New Zealand for family reasons after a few years, the pull of that

demanding kitchen proved too strong. “I think after working in a place like that which is so full-on, I craved it,” Monica says. “Going back to New Zealand, which was so friendly, it just didn’t have that buzz, that vibe, that hospitality provided here for me and also the opportunity that when you wanted to jump on a plane and go over to Europe for the weekend, I really missed it. Sucker!” She laughs.

Monica has spoken many times of the toll those long hours take, particularly the impact on family. She met David at Le Gavroche, where he was the sommelier, and when they had daughter Anais Monica took a step back so she could spend more time at home. But the “part-time” hours of a chef at a Michelin star restaurant are still pretty brutal. “I was doing two double shifts, and three half days which were nine to four, and that was part-time for me, to be able to see my daughter three times a week at night.”

The difficulties of child care were augmented by the fact neither had any support in London, with David’s family in France. Anais is rather proud of the family business, though Monica acknowledges it was tough to effectively lose her parents to work for those critical months ahead of opening in March last year and as the restaurant found its feet.

Filming MasterChef adds another layer of complication. “Normally it’s from May until July, and then I’m filming from seven to seven and I get a motorbike taxi back to the restaurant for the evening service, they’re long days. And then trying to fit the evening with my daughter in, it gets a bit crazy. But you just tell yourself it’s only for a couple of months,” she says. “We’ve managed – she’s still alive, she’s 11,” Monica laughs loudly again.

Anais is, unsurprisingly, rather knowledgeable about food, so much so her mother jokes she’s trying to make her “undate-able” so she’ll never leave home. “She loves to cook. She loves to judge – too much sometimes,” Monica says. “She loves to eat out. When we took her to a three-star Michelin restaurant, I think it was Ducasse, my husband and I were having the tasting menu. The waiter said ‘And for your child’, and we said ‘No, no, she’ll just have the a la carte’, and she burst into tears. She said ‘I wanted the tasting menu too’. She was only six and she ate it all!”

Monica is quick to point out that with such experiences come responsibility. “It’s making her



Eye for detail
Monica keeps a close watch on everything at Mere.

understand that not all children eat like she does. That she’s very privileged to have the lifestyle she has,” she says. “She’s sick of hearing it. ‘Yes, when Mummy grew up she didn’t have any food and she had to share ...’ Her upbringing is 100 times different to what I had but, in saying that, I loved my childhood.”

She’s making a long overdue, if all-too-short, trip home to New Zealand on her way to Margaret River Gourmet Escape next month. Unfortunately, the fact that she and her husband rely so much on one another, Monica keeping an eye on front of house when David’s off and David ensuring what comes out of the kitchen is up to scratch when she’s away, means the sommelier won’t get to experience the delights of our most celebrated wine region. She’s bringing a lucky assistant chef instead.

“It is smack bang in the middle of the busiest time of year and I did hum and haw about leaving this time of year, so it is a very quick trip,” she says. “I’ve got three days in New Zealand where I’m doing a Pacific Islands summit and then straight to Perth to do Escape and then back home. I’m dying for the day when a family member will get here, it’s really difficult, it’s a lot of money to get here and some of

them have little kids, I get it. But I’m hoping my dad’s going to make it out next year.”

Never a follower of trends, Monica is instead inspired by the changes of the season. “Now it’s autumn, you’ve got the beautiful mushrooms coming in, the cheese from France that has been aged especially for this time of year coming out,” she says. And then there’s her travels. “For example, when I’m in Morocco, I go out and make our own ras el hanout and bring kilos of that back.” Ah, the joys of having all that on your doorstep, I say enviously. “Yes but then you have such beautiful produce in Australia and New Zealand. I miss things like Moreton Bay bugs and the seafood in Australia is amazing. Now you have fantastic truffles, I remember when they were starting out 12 years ago and everyone was like ‘Oh really’, and now look at it!”

Travel informs her menu in subtle ways, such as with a divine-sounding dukkah, a mix of hazelnut and spices with a black codfish curry. You’re also likely to find more than a few nods to her heritage on Mere’s menu, such as Kiwi, a pavlova with pineapple curd and kiwi sorbet, or Hokey-Pokey, featuring a gel starring the Kiwi drink L&P.

While the UK is home now, Monica has never forgotten her roots, though she has to remind herself to reflect on her success. “We’re always striving to do better and more, and you forget to appreciate what you’ve done to get where you are,” she concedes. “It’s very competitive here in London, you’ve always got to keep challenging, keep pushing. And you just never know with a television career how long that goes ... it’s about finding a balance.”

How would Mere feel about her daughter’s achievements? “Oh Mum, God, she’s with me every day. I don’t have to ask what she thinks, I know. She was my huge support through life. Every time I got a big promotion or something Mum was the one on the other end of the line, and my mother sacrificed so much, went without so many times, to put food on the table for us kids,” she says. “I just think, you know what, she’ll live forever because everyone who comes here will know her name.” **W**

Mere Comes to the Antipodes, lunch at Wise Vineyard restaurant, is on Sunday, November 18, tickets \$250, see gourmetescape.com.au.

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