

Second helpings

These food-loving best mates tell **Julie Hosking** why winning MKR was just the start of something special.

When things get a little hot under the collar in the kitchen, best mates Will Stewart and Steve Flood have a simple solution. "It's time to put down the kitchen utensils, go have a beer and unwind," Will says.

Not that the former bankers have had much time to down tools since they won My Kitchen Rules in May last year. Perhaps because of their finance background – and the fact they had both been made redundant – they had their eyes on the long game when they entered the reality cooking show.

"Steve had always wanted to go into the food industry and we thought we're not just going to go on this show, we're going to leverage this," Will says.

"We've been given an amazing opportunity in front of Australia to build a profile and we've got to take everything that it brings to us and turn it into something special. We're two guys in the food industry striving to better ourselves, and hopefully make people laugh along the way."

Viewers warmed as much to their bromance as to the duo's burgeoning cooking skills. "We were good friends before we took on the challenge of My Kitchen Rules and there was a lot of support through some hard times for both of us," Steve says. "We did have that natural connection that you just can't fake."

It's a connection that had the Gourmet Pommies, as they call their business, planning a future after MKR long before three million people watched them win a tight final.

"We were chasing a book deal before we won the show," says Steve. "It was a hard, long road to get to where we are – it was probably two years in the making. We locked ourselves in the house for the best part of three months completing the manuscript. I put it down as one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life."

So they're understandably rather excited to be finally holding copies of their first cookbook, Will and Steve: Home Cook, Aspiring Chef. "I took mine to bed last night," Will says with a laugh. "My wife (Maggie) did know about it, though!"

The cookbook plays to their different strengths. "I'm very much the home cook and Steve's the aspiring chef and I think the fact we both know our place in the kitchen is what makes us quite a strong

team," Will explains. "I can come up with some great ideas for home-cooked dishes and Steve takes them to the next level. That's what we want the reader to be able to achieve, in their own home – to maybe push themselves a little bit but without fearing it."

So Steve takes the ingredients from Will's shepherd's pie and makes lamb backstrap with pomme puree and burnt onions. And Will's summer fruit crumble with creme Anglaise becomes Steve's more technical panna cotta with blueberry shortbread and strawberry sorbet. There are also masterclasses in scotch eggs, pickles, chicken liver parfait, crispy pork belly, and rosemary and sea salt foccacia.

The guys have fun along the way, taking the mickey out of each other as they answer questions about recipes that will inevitably crop up for the home cook. "We know in person if we're doing a cooking demo or we're hosting an event, it's very easy to get our personality out there," says Steve. "But to get it onto a page it required some really out-there thinking, where we would do a Q&A for every single recipe. A question would be asked, for instance, by Will and I would kind of solve these little problems that people would come across all the time while they're cooking."

And they really want readers to ask questions. "I think a lot of people are afraid to ask questions but I'm not. I'm the first to put my hand up and say I'm a little bit stupid," Will says. "And I think it's quite important for the reader to be able to ask questions along the way. We're encouraging people to email us with their questions if they've got any issues with the recipes."

There's certainly plenty for them to digest – more than 100 recipes that are a blend of updated favourites reflecting their English upbringing to thoroughly modern dishes and share plates that sum up their new lives in Australia.

They both landed in Sydney in October 2007, transferred by the same investment bank, and before long had bonded over Friday drinks, though Will confesses when Steve applied for a role in his team "I did have my concerns about the amount of time he spent in the office kitchen rather than at his desk".

Neither can imagine taking the leap into reality TV in England. "We would have been far too much in our comfort zone to ever step aside and do something so outrageous," says Steve.

But Australia is very much about having a crack,

'We feel a real warmth everywhere we go.'



Food and friendship
Steve Flood (left) and Will Stewart are building a strong brand. PICTURES WILLIAM MEPPERM

argues Will. "I think that's certainly what we've epitomised over the past year or so and that support we've had from the Australians – and we're now Australians ourselves, we're citizens and we call ourselves Aussies – has been invaluable. We feel a real warmth everywhere we go. It is that give-it-a-go mentality and I don't think I ever had that living in the UK. It's a little bit suppressed, people are a little bit afraid to step outside of their comfort zone."

Maybe it's the lack of sunshine? "I am a firm believer in that, with my mental health issues," says Will, who has spoken openly about his battles with depression. "My life has changed significantly from the moment I touched down in Sydney ... the outdoorsy lifestyle, the sunshine, the friendly nature of everybody here. And then there's the general positive attitude that people seem to have."

The affable pair don't have any time to bask in their latest achievement – they are hard at work on their next venture, a suite of artisan pizza bars.

"We're working with some really good guys who've been developing this brand and concept for a couple of years now and we've been brought in as the food directors, given a share of the company and we've thrown everything into it," says Steve.

MKR judge Colin Fassnidge, who has become a mentor and wrote the foreword to their book, helped steer them in this direction. "We sat down with him very early on, and we do every six weeks or so, just to have a beer and check in. He's just a great guy," says Steve. "Whenever we need him, we can call and he'll give us as honest advice as he can. And he kind of said to us 'Look, steer away from restaurants, it's the quickest way to lose money, even when there is money to be made it's such a small margin'. So he encouraged us to go in a slightly different way."

Their new venture will be simple but high quality. "We're turning our pizza offering into more of a gourmet-style pizza but just as quick as you would get



fast food, with the dough being made right in front of you,” Steve says. “I’ve got a whiteboard to my right and I’d say four toppings is the most but usually it’s three; the more ingredients you put on there the more muddled it becomes. We want every ingredient to really sing.”

The mates hope to have 15 outlets across Australia by the end of next year, although most will be on the eastern seaboard. They also have a sparkling green tea due out soon and are putting the finishing touches to a contract with charity OzHarvest to turn some warehouse space into a food studio.

Through this crazy ride, have there been any big arguments? “There’s very little conflict in our relationship,” says Steve. “We’ve recently been away from each other for a few weeks each, and we’ve had jobs in Australia that we’ve had to execute without each other. It’s been such an odd thing to stand up on a stage or MC an event without Will beside me, without that natural banter that people can relate to.”

Will is equally upbeat about the journey they’ve been on and what lies ahead. “It’s absolutely phenomenal. We can share in the highs and support each other during the lows,” he says. “And we’re not going to stop with one book ... and we obviously want a TV show as well. That would be the golden goose for us, if we could get our own show. We need the credibility of this cookbook to show people we’re not just two goons who went on a reality TV show, that we’ve actually got something to offer.”

One thing’s for sure: they don’t miss the world of finance. “God, no. We’re having too much fun,” says Will. “Everything’s been hard work but we’ve done the vast majority with a laugh and a smile. We know that we’re very lucky, we know that we’ve been given an amazing springboard, and we’re embracing every single minute of every single day here in Australia.” **W**

willandsteve.com.au



Will & Steve:
Home Cook,
Aspiring Chef
Will Stewart &
Steve Flood
(Harlequin, \$40)

Preheat your oven to 200C. Place the sweet potato on a baking tray with a drizzle of olive oil, a sprinkling of salt and ½ teaspoon of ground cumin and roast for 35 minutes until cooked through. Combine the chickpeas, tahini, garlic, the cayenne pepper, the remaining salt and ground cumin and the vegetable stock in a blender and blitz. Do not expect the mixture to immediately blend smooth. It may take a number of times blitzing and stirring, adding a little olive oil each time to get a more even blend. Add the sweet potato to the blender and blitz again. Gradually pour in the ice-cold water and blitz until the consistency you desire. Season to taste with the lemon juice and salt and pepper. Spoon the hummus into a large bowl and, using the back of the spoon, guide to the outside of the dish as you turn the bowl with your other hand – this creates a well. Pour a drizzle of olive oil into the well, sprinkle on the herbs, pine nuts and a pinch of salt.

feature

Sweet Potato Hummus

In this one we’re using roasted sweet potato, which adds a nice sweetness.

Prep and cook time: 1 hour. Serves 4

- 2 large sweet potatoes, cut into 2.5cm die
- 1 cup olive oil
- 1 tsp sea salt flakes
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 x 400g tin chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 2 tbsp hulled tahini
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- ¼ tsp cayenne pepper
- ½ cup vegetable stock
- ¼ cup ice-cold water
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Freshly ground black pepper

Garnish

- ¼ bunch of flat-leaf parsley, roughly chopped
- ¼ cup pine nuts, toasted

BY POPULAR DEMAND, SECOND CONCERT SAT 5 NOV, 2PM NOW ON SALE!

★ STARS OF THE ROYAL EDINBURGH MILITARY TATTOO ★

The World Famous Pipes & Drums of
THE ROYAL SCOTS
DRAGOON GUARDS

CROWN THEATRE – SAT 5TH NOV, 2PM & 7.30PM

Book at ticketmaster.com.au or 136 100 or Crown Theatre Box Office

GPR882

