



● Paula Goodyer

# Kids in the kitchen

*MasterChef* is a hit with children but is it good for them?

**C**an a TV program featuring lots of pastry and pork belly improve the way Australian kids eat? Maybe. A small study of Adelaide primary-school students suggests that watching *MasterChef* improves their knowledge of ingredients and has a positive influence on their attitudes towards cooking.

"We found that kids were talking about food techniques in the playground and it's knowledge like this that can make them more confident about cooking," says the lead investigator, Clare Phillips, from Flinders University's public health department.

"The program has raised the profile of cooking. It's emerged from being a domestic chore to something quite exciting."

As well as broadening children's food vocabulary, the show has ignited their imaginations and started them talking about food.

"We can't say that it's influencing children to eat healthier but if it's increasing their interest in cooking from scratch, then that's a first step," Phillips says.

Why study the impact of *MasterChef* on primary-school children? Because

it's so popular in that age group. In its debut season in 2009, it toppled *The Simpsons* off its long-held perch as most popular program for nine- to 12-year-olds.

"From a public health point of view, if children are watching a program on food for up to seven hours a week, then it's important to study what they're watching and if they're being influenced. This is only a preliminary study but it's opening up the discussion and I think it warrants more research," says Phillips, who thinks we also need to look at the influence celebrity chefs have on children's food choices.

Although *MasterChef* is often criticised for overdoing the butter and sugar, the 39 children in the study appeared to recognise that *MasterChef* food wasn't everyday fare.

They described it as the food you'd make for a dinner party or, as one of them put it, "if the Queen was coming for dinner". And they also knew that too much *MasterChef* food could equal too much weight.

"The kids were concerned about obesity," Phillips says. "Some said they wouldn't want to be a judge on *MasterChef* because they 'wouldn't want to get fat like they do'."

Even Jane Martin of the organisation that lobbies for tighter regulation around food, the Obesity Policy Coalition, says there's merit in *MasterChef* because of its focus on real food.

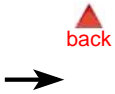
"If a lot of food eaten at home is pre-

prepared, it's hard for kids to learn what the raw ingredients look like," Martin says. "Even with some prepared salads, the beetroot comes in strips, so *MasterChef* gives a sense of reality to where food comes from. The food on the program is pretty unadulterated. You see a whole fish, not crumbed fish, and when you see someone cutting up a whole lamb carcass as they did in one episode, there's no mistaking where it's from."

This kind of viewing also puts pressure on parents to cook from scratch, she says, and makes the idea of cooking fun.

"Kids get a great sense of achievement from cooking something themselves. I don't think the fact that it uses a lot of butter and fat is a bad thing because I think kids understand that this is about making special-occasion food."

Healthy-eating campaigners might be less enthusiastic about the ad breaks. The ads on *Junior MasterChef* last year, when it was the



highest-rating program for five- to 12-year-olds, included some not-so-fresh foods, Martin says – McDonald's, Hungry Jack's, Snickers, Fanta, V energy drink, Red Bull, Smith's crisps and Magnum ice-cream.

Paula Goodyer blogs at [smh.com.au/chewonthis](http://smh.com.au/chewonthis).

*Junior MasterChef* airs on Channel Ten on Sundays and Mondays at 7.30pm.



In the mix ... Miraede from *Junior MasterChef*.