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Mastering the brand: how an ‘ordinary’ cook achieved extraordinary (cookbook) success

Abstract:

Since 2009, *Masterchef Australia* has been a ratings and marketing juggernaut. Through numerous product placements and associated merchandise, it has become one of the most lucrative brands in Australia’s burgeoning food-related media. While contestants’ cooking prowess and flair for ‘plating’ are ostensibly central to the show’s appeal, *Masterchef Australia* also draws from the more general conventions of reality television. For instance, contestants inevitably display more than their skills in the kitchen; they reveal (some say contrive) aspects of their personal lives that render them more or less attractive to viewers. This article considers how the winner of the inaugural series, Julie Goodwin, fashioned an endearing persona that was both relatable and inspirational. Her ‘everywoman’ image informed both her television journey – from ‘ordinary mum’ to series winner – as well as her various forays into various commercial projects, not the least of which were best-selling cookbooks.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

Since 2009 *Masterchef Australia* has become one of the most marketable brands in Australia. The franchise has produced a top-rating television series, as well as myriad branded products across media, retail and publishing. With the show's emphasis on the 'extraordinary journeys' of ordinary cooks, *Masterchef Australia* inspires audiences to not only identify with these contestants, but also 'consume' them in various ways. In particular, this phenomenon informed and underpinned the success of *Our family table* and *The heart of the home*, two cookbooks written by the 2009 series winner, Julie Goodwin. These titles obviously showcased the breadth of Goodwin's culinary talents, but more importantly they capitalized on her personal brand, something that *Masterchef Australia* accommodated and encouraged. While the cross-platform success of celebrity chefs is hardly new (see Bonner 2009), it pays to take stock of how *Masterchef Australia* works with (and through) twenty-first century commercial media, and how contestants in turn contrive personal brands that can be leveraged beyond television. In Goodwin's case, the mainstream appeal of an 'ordinary mum' proved an endearing point of difference in the competitive world of contemporary publishing. Indeed, these books effectively became the most old-fashioned and (ironically) most enduring elements in her marketable, multimedia brand. As Goodwin staked her burgeoning public profile on the image cultivated in *Masterchef Australia*, the commercial triumph of the cookbooks suggests that, given how mercurial celebrity can be – especially when achieved through the much-maligned genre of reality television – cooks today do well to invest in a carefully crafted personal brand. To this end, *Masterchef Australia* proved to be a fitting and fruitful vehicle.

A food-culture economy

To make sense of how *Masterchef Australia* prepares its contestants for lucrative post-show careers, it pays to take stock of its enviable position within the burgeoning food-culture economy. Each year *AdNews*, the influential go-to guide for Australia's advertising industry, compiles a 'Power 50' list of the nation's most influential power brokers in advertising, media and marketing. Its selection criteria include company performance, community standing and industry respect. Not surprisingly, the top 5 positions in the 2010 list consisted of some formidable and familiar suits: Harold Mitchell, CEO of the Mitchell Communication Group (the nation's largest media planning and buying group); John Hartigan, CEO and chairman of News Limited; Kerry Stokes (chairman of the Seven Media Group); and Gerry Harvey, CEO of Harvey Norman. So the list goes, with behind-the-scenes individuals that dominate and determine what Australians see, read, hear and buy. The only non-individual to make the list, albeit at number 50, and just after Lachlan Murdoch, was *Masterchef Australia*. *AdNews* reasoned that *Masterchef Australia* made the list for two very simple reasons: it was a ratings triumph, with a record-breaking 3.72 million viewers tuning in for the first-series finale; and it was the first television show to break the \$100 million advertising revenue mark (Hargreaves 2010: 90). Quite simply, from a marketing perspective, *Masterchef Australia* 'cut through the clutter': as consumers

disperse over diverse and disparate media, the show triumphed in drawing a mass audience, a rare and prized feat in the 21st century. On average, 2 million viewers tuned into the weeknight broadcasts.

In tone, aesthetics and emphasis, *Masterchef Australia* is a very different proposition to the UK original, which was devised for the BBC and first aired in 1990. While it too focused on amateur cooks that aspired to be professional chefs, the format was much leaner. With just three contestants that undergo a series of kitchen challenges, the UK version spotlights the competition of culinary skill, almost exclusively. *Masterchef Australia*, however, works through distinct narrative arcs. As one critic wrote in *Eureka Street*, ‘This is the theme park version of *Masterchef*. It is *Masterchef* as imagined by the network behind Australia’s *Big Brother* and *The Biggest Loser* [that is, Network Ten]. Its formula owes a lot to these shows’ (Kroenert 2009: np). For this critic, the singular genius of the UK *Masterchef* was its relative absence of emotion or biography. Viewers learn little of the contestants’ back-stories, so there is no personal trajectory on which viewers can plot the *Masterchef* ‘journey’. To link *Masterchef Australia* to *Big Brother* or *The Biggest Loser* then suggests that, in various ways, it’s not too far removed from the more maligned examples of a widely maligned genre: reality television. Certainly, in its various manifestations since the early 1990s, reality television often places ‘ordinary’ people in situations or settings that are otherwise highly contrived or manipulated, and captures their ostensibly organic or unscripted reactions with a view to maximising opportunities for drama, surprise, tension and tears.

For its proximity to soap opera then, reality television has been likened to ‘emotional pornography’ (Dixon 2008: 56). To take effect though, this involves viewers’ investment in the contestants’ personal stories. Beyond any cooking skill, viewers must connect with the private lives of these newly public figures. On *Masterchef Australia*, contestants’ cooking ambitions are invariably conflated with lifestyle ambitions: for family pride, or career satisfaction, or for self-acceptance. It is contestants’ ordinariness (they enter as cement renderers, surf lifeguards, financial planners, and legal secretaries) that viewers identify with.

Journeys and transformations

In the contestants’ transformations, viewers witness more than competition. Moreover, and unlike *Big Brother* et al., *Masterchef Australia* extends the transformative experience to its audience; as contestants broaden their cooking repertoire as they progress through the competition, so too do viewers. Herein lies the lucrative link: *Masterchef Australia* activates consumer behaviour – from the scores of ‘product placement’ deals that see strategically-placed branded goods integrated into the *Masterchef* challenges (Western Star butter, Riverina Fresh Milk, Campbell’s Real Stock etc. etc.), to the *Masterchef*-themed recipe cards at Coles supermarkets, to the *Masterchef* magazine: here is a branded system that is popular, trusted and practical – a golden triumvirate in the world of food marketing. In turn, the show furnishes contestants with the ideal platform from which their success in the show can

blossom. Having already established their personalities in the service of ‘good TV’ (their hopes and fears, highs and lows) they have a ready-made public profile.

On this front, *Masterchef Australia* does not disappoint. There was, for example, Adele Fragnito, the 49 year-old mother of two, whose tendency to cry, about almost anything, become something of a signature – but also linked her appearance on the program to her dream of opening a cafe with her intellectually-disabled son. Also, Matthew Caldicott, the young accountant who dreamed of *Masterchef* glory in order to change the mind of his sceptical father, and make him proud; and band manager Aaron Harvie, who placed his engagement on hold to compete in *Masterchef* – and turn his rock-god energy towards pasta perfection. The UK *Masterchef* would not have given its viewers such access to these personal details; but *Masterchef Australia* brought them to the fore, and threaded contestants’ drive and involvement to something other than sport. The tactic paid off, and deepened viewers’ engagement with these otherwise ‘ordinary people’. In the whirlwind of online forums, Facebook updates, blog-spots and Tweets, the smallest details were discussed and debated, like Joanne Zaim’s seemingly unbearable pout, and the tragic-comedy of Jake Bujayer, whose first foray into the *Masterchef* kitchen saw him deal with one knife cut after another – and literally turned this ‘little Aussie battler’ into a ‘little Aussie bleeder’. These insights inflected the official narrative – of a cooking competition – and this had at least two main effects: first, it widened the show’s thematic breadth, and furnished fans with the conventional hallmarks of television drama (with emotive twists and turns); and second, it allowed contestants to reveal their personalities – their personal brands – in ways that could sustain lucrative cooking and/or media careers once production had stopped.

The point here is not so much that the integrity of *Masterchef Australia* as a cooking show was undermined by virtue of these ‘soapie’ aspects. On the contrary, if one is to seriously take stock of its success, and make sense of it in an era that sees the dwindling and fragmentation of the television audience, it cannot be dismissed. The propensity for reality television to take ordinary people from relative obscurity and promise them a taste of stardom, albeit briefly, is a point of much contention. In his influential accounts of this phenomenon – the mass production of celebrity – Graeme Turner wrote of the ‘demotic turn’ and the growing imperative of contemporary television to not just mediate cultural identities but to create them ‘from scratch’. As befits media’s power though, Turner argues that this process serves to generate endlessly recyclable (viewed here as ‘cheap’) content: ‘Performing ordinariness has become an end in itself, and thus a rich and (it seems) almost inexhaustible means of generating new content for familiar formats’ (Turner 2006: 158). Or, to put it another way, shows like *Masterchef Australia* ostensibly help ordinary people make the leap from the periphery to the centre of social life, but this leap is either illusory or short-lived, and, having fulfilled the promotional run of whatever franchise they’ve been embedded in, these people invariably return to the ‘real’ reality of their ultimately ordinary lives.

It is not hard to see why some reality television would inspire some despondence. Shows like *Big Brother*, for instance, shamelessly (and some would say shamefully) depend on contestants with no specific skills or talent, merely a willingness to endure

tasks or situations ever more bizarre, extreme or exploitative. In fact, it's this level of contrivance that, for numerous critics, renders the name 'reality television' a hopeless misnomer, so removed are these settings from anything remotely real (i.e. being hot-housed with strangers, or stuck on a remote island, *Survivor* style). As noted, *Masterchef Australia* does depend on the quasi-soap conventions seen in much Reality TV. However, and perhaps in the wake of audience fatigue with earlier styles of the genre (Bodey 2010: 5, Hendy 2010: 10), *Masterchef Australia* is a very different case. First, its entry point is culinary skill. While shows like *The X Factor* are similarly interested in finding new and genuine (or at least marketable) talent, *Masterchef Australia* spares deluded hopefuls the humiliation of a very public and inevitably futile audition. The show takes cooking talent as the starting point. Second though, as contestants exit the competition, viewers see them reunited with loved ones and embraced as winners – despite, strictly speaking, not winning. They are not bruised by defeat, but become examples of ordinary people that 'had a go'. The fact that so many of them go on to establish successful careers in the wider food economy (such as Poh Ling Yeow, Justine Schofield, Marion Grasby and Skye Craig) attests to this – and also shows just how much *Masterchef Australia* contributes to such brand-based endeavours.

The 'everywoman': Julie Goodwin

As it happens, the most spectacular post-show success is undoubtedly that enjoyed by the winner of the inaugural *Masterchef Australia* series, Julie Goodwin. Moreover, and perhaps more pointedly than any other contestant, she embodied 'ordinariness' that was both relatable and instructive. Goodwin entered the competition as the archetypical 'everywoman', a 38-year-old wife and mother whose pre-fame life consisted of helping her husband with his IT business, and raising three young boys. Her accessibility manifested in other ways too. Goodwin's image was little like the hyper-stylised hopefuls that populate *Big Brother*, *The X-Factor* et al., whose sexed-up appearances leave little doubt that they seek the 'real' celebrity of post-show engagements and contracts. Rather, Goodwin's plump physique, unruly curls and tendency to fluster and sweat when under pressure (usually during the Pressure Tests) marked her as *authentically* 'ordinary'. The fact that her culinary specialties veered towards the traditional and familiar only confirmed her 'back-to-basics' style: Goodwin was a return to the Margaret Fulton-world of cooking, where meals were prepared more with a spirit of love, generosity and pride than the artistic pretensions of nouvelle cuisine. While there is nothing to suggest that Goodwin massaged this motherly persona on-set for the sake of a distinct brand identity beyond the competition, there is little doubt that it became the central motif around which her media profile and various projects were ultimately fashioned. As such, without the narrative scaffolding of the *Masterchef* format, with contestants' personalities shown for dramatic effect, it would have been much harder for her to capitalise on this lucrative image: Brand Julie Goodwin.

Goodwin's win of *Masterchef Australia* meant a prize of AU \$100,000 as well as a publishing deal for her own cookbook, to be released by May 2010 (in time for

Mother's Day). Not surprisingly, the cookbook was a tribute to the winner's family-focused style, *Our family table*. The recipes were a mix of reliable classics (Sunday roast, buttermilk pancakes, chocolate cake) as well as some from her *Masterchef* oeuvre (Lemon Diva Cupcakes). Goodwin's television image thus informed the book's entire marketing: 'I hope people don't see it as just another cookbook. It really is about all the things that bring people together at the table' (quoted in Murray 2010: 15). Published by Random House just weeks before the start of *Masterchef Australia* Series Two, *Our family table* topped the Australian bestseller list within a fortnight of its release. With a Forward by cooking doyenne Margaret Fulton, and like Goodwin herself (or at least her brand), the cookbook was pitched as a go-to guide for trusted and wholesome family favourites. Fulton's involvement is telling: first published in 1968, 1.5 million copies of *The Margaret Fulton cookbook* have been sold, making it a veritable staple in Australian kitchens. *Our family table* seems destined for similar status. According to Nielsen BookScan data, by October 2010 it had sold 135,000 copies and generated \$3.7 million in sales for Random House (Thomsen 2010: 42).

With her win, Goodwin was inundated with offers from advertising companies, publishers and television networks. The two deals she eventually signed only enhanced her particular brand: she became the resident chef of Channel 9's long-running breakfast show *Today*, and agreed to write a monthly column for Australia's longest-running women's magazine, *The Australian women's weekly*. In terms of demographic targets, both *Today* and *The Australian women's weekly* aim for a comfortable middle ground, the perfect milieu for Goodwin's brand. Her conservative streak even extended to a nine-track album she released in December 2010, *Christmas with Julie Goodwin*. Accompanied by a booklet featuring traditional Christmas recipes, Goodwin's hymn choices were suitably recognisable. When her second cookbook *The heart of the home* was published in September 2011, with yet 100 more family-oriented recipes, Goodwin seemingly confirmed her place in the Australian food landscape.

In terms of cookbook sales, it seems Goodwin not only arrived during a cookbook boom, she helped it peak. The sector grew 35 per cent between 2008 and 2011: Australians bought 3.6 million cookbooks in 2010, but that figure dropped to 3.386 million in 2011 (Meares 2012: 14). While it is arguable that the market has been challenged by the various ways digital media displaces traditional book-buying habits, with recipes now more readily retrievable from Google, tablet 'apps' and such, the Goodwin charm cannot be ignored. Those cookbooks that continue to dominate bestseller lists are invariably associated with media personalities – such as Jamie Oliver, Donna Hay, Kylie Kwong and Nigella Lawson. That Julie Goodwin joined this rollcall underlines the brand-making capacity of the *Masterchef* model, as well as its potential to upset existing hierarchies. Goodwin's style is unabashedly modest, much to the chagrin of some reviewers. In his review of *Our family table*, *The Sun-Herald's* Winsor Dobbin wrote: 'This is, in fact, a book from a cook not a chef, a storybook collection of recipes from family and friends with chapters on a variety of themes from 'feeding the multitudes' to 'rainy day cooking'. It is chock full of the sorts of meals produced in suburban homes every day, so not ideal for honing superior skills' (Dobbin 2010: 12). Of course, Goodwin's market was 'suburban homes', so

her pitch was just right. Indeed, selling some 2500 copies a week, *Our family table* out-performed the official *Masterchef* cookbook (*Masterchef Australia: the cookbook volume one*) by a rate of 2.5 times (Cauchi 2010: 4). So, where some of the Series One alumni had more boutique tastes and ostensibly ‘superior skills’ (runner up Poh, for example), Goodwin’s appeal was her accessibility, and her mass-market success attests to this.

Goodwin’s appeal has even affected the evolution of the show that launched her. In 2012, *Masterchef Australia* promised fans that Series Four would be a ‘return to form’. According to Gary Mehigan, who hosts the show alongside Matt Preston and George Calombaris, Series Three (in 2011) had been an odd and only partial success. On the one hand, the range and calibre of guest chefs on the show was stunning, and included Heston Blumenthal (from Fat Duck), David Chang (from Momofuku) and Rene Redzepi (from Noma). Their star wattage aside though, Mehigan conceded that, for the average *Masterchef* fan, the guests’ cooking styles were more intimidating than inspiring: ‘Everybody who was anybody was on our show. And maybe that was the mistake, because Betty from Dandenong just looked at it and went, “I don’t get it”’ (quoted in Quinn 2012). By the hosts’ own admission, in 2011 *Masterchef Australia* strayed too far from the show’s key attraction, which was so succinctly defined by its Series One winner:

What enamoured us most with Julie [Goodwin] is that she always seemed to be struggling and stressed and often confused, and yet through that confusion and disaster you were hanging on to, ‘Well, what’s it going to taste like?’ And I think that’s inspirational to home cooks (quoted in Quinn 2012).

Goodwin was therefore relatable in ways that Blumenthal et al. could never be, by virtue of the struggles and stress that linked her survival in the series to ‘Betty from Dandenong’. Goodwin’s win affirmed the efforts of ‘ordinary’ cooks, and this secured her place in a cookbook market already replete with the upmarket alternatives from celebrity chefs.

Conclusion

While it remains to be seen how well subsequent *Masterchef* winners convert their television success into successful multi-platform careers, Julie Goodwin is nonetheless a fitting example of someone that has. From the start, her image rested on a distinct ‘ordinariness’ – in appearance, manner and taste, Goodwin approximated the cultural middle ground. This may not have excited the gourmants in the audience, but it inspired many others. In Goodwin, Australians saw someone familiar, comforting and humble, whose learning curve was steep, and yet – for all her stress and struggle – ultimately triumphed. In this way, Goodwin plied her ‘ordinariness’ into a lucrative cross-media profile. As such, and despite the splintering of audiences and readerships across new digital technologies, Brand Julie Goodwin offered a narrative that is both reassuring and perennially appealing: the ‘every woman’ that had a go – and won.

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