



Will the real celebrity MasterChef please stand up

Celebrity MasterChef kicked off, and there's little doubt who the real stars are. It's hard to get a table at Hellenic Republic at the best of times, but this Monday night it was impossible.

It was standing room only at George Calombaris's taverna in East Brunswick as about 220 people crammed in for the launch of his new cookbook, *Greek Cookery From the Hellenic Heart*. It was an invitation-only event and it didn't look like there were too many nos among the RSVPs.

Across town at the same moment, Stephanie Alexander was launching her new book, *The Kitchen Garden Companion*. It was a typical book launch, a genteel affair at kitchenware store *Essential Ingredient*, well attended but with no trappings other than a few nibbles.

In East Brunswick, a suburb not ordinarily known for its flashiness, it was obvious even before you got in the room that this was not your typical bookish event. There was a red velvet rope outside the front door, a besuited doorman and a glam doorbitch, blue carpet on the footpath. (What's with this blue-carpet thing anyway? They had it at the Brownlows too, thanks to some sponsorship deal. Red not classy enough for yas?) It was a bit like trying to get

into a nightclub on Cup eve. "My name should be on the door, mate. Yeah, I'm real good friends with George, eh. Honest."

Inside it was a crush. An exceptionally well-catered crush. Plates of Cypriot meatballs - juicy lumps of grilled lamb on a bed of yoghurt - sped around the room. The olives were fat, juicy and perfect. Then the gyros, a moist wrap of pita bread around shreds of tender lamb, salad and - oh, joy - chips. (To fully savour such a treat you need to devour it at 3am with a gutful of beer, but hey, you can't have everything.) There were even desserts, Greek donuts and gorgeous little filo-wrapped custard balls. Sensational.

The speeches were from George's MasterChef co-hosts Gary Mehigan (he was George's mentor at the Sofitel restaurant where he did his apprenticeship and, later, at the Richmond restaurant Fenix) and Fairfax writer Matt Preston. Then professional wog George Kapiniaris took to the stage, dressed as a black-clad old lady, George's aunty. There were plenty of Greeks in the room - "George's 300 cousins", Gary joked - and they lapped it up, even though many of them had seen it before.

"Us Greeks are fantastic," Kapiniaris said after he'd shed the black dress and wig to reveal the Ed Hardy T-shirt and chrome dome beneath. "We invented everything. And then Jesus came along and said, 'Don't do anything till I get back.'" Tish-boom.

With the old lady gone, the party could really start. The

techno began pumping and we were miraculously transported to Mykonos, where George is consultant to yet another restaurant. All it needed was a group of miserable sunburnt English tourists in the corner, complaining about the food. "Fish and chips," I said to 'im, 'Fish and chips, that's what I bloody well want'. But it were like I were speaking a foreign lang-widge."

The crowd parted, and there was Matt Preston, surrounded by women waving pens for an autograph, or urging their husbands to take a photograph of them with him. He was unfailingly generous with his time and his smile, and everyone left feeling a little better for the experience.

Matt's got a book of his own, *Cravat-a-licious*, to be launched (more modestly, in a bookstore with cheese and wine, but also with large cardboard versions of himself in attendance) in a couple of weeks. Gary has one slated for next year. As George said up on stage earlier, "We've got to make some money from all this somehow". (Rumour has it they were paid rather less than a king's ransom for the original MasterChef, though it's a safe bet their fees have risen a little since.)

Celebrity MasterChef goes to air. There's a state premier (Anna Bligh), a musician (Alex Lloyd) and a Miss Universe Australia (Rachel Finch) among the contestants. But as 220 people in East Brunswick could well attest, there's not much doubting who the real stars will be.

Article from Brisbane Times

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