

# THE POH SHOW



Creating art on a plate or canvas is a necessity for Poh Ling Yeow. She tells NICOLE BITTAR that a balanced palette primes the delighted palate





For someone who appears so prominently in the public eye, chef and TV personality Poh Ling Yeow is, first and foremost, an artist who craves “large slabs of alone time”. Not that she ever, if rarely, achieves it.

After six years as a professional illustrator and painter, the artist describes her career switch as “an idiot thing within me that needs to conquer new lands”.

Initially harbouring a creative interest in recipe writing and food styling, Poh put theory into practice in a more hands-on approach.

Enter the kitchen.

With her Malaysian background steeped in a vibrant street-food culture, where the next meal is always on the menu, creating edible art was a natural transition.

Since her runner-up status on *MasterChef* in 2009, cooking show series *Beat the Chef* and the exceedingly catchy *Poh’s Kitchen* on ABC-TV and *Poh & Co.* on SBS, café Jamface at Adelaide Central Market in her adopted hometown, a raft of cookbook releases, including the latest receiving the finishing touches, her adoring public won’t let her rest.

“I have this child called Jamface and it is taking up a lot of my time.”

Not that Poh is complaining.

Gratitude defines her dynamic persona and gives rise to her success.

“I appreciate everything,” she says. “I always walk through life with gratitude. I think that’s why things fall my way, because I always see the bright side.”

She likens life to a pendulum, which provides a contrast between the good and bad and thus the inherent appreciation of the other. But a little family time would be welcomed with open arms.

“The years are flying by and I could count on two hands the number of times I’ve seen my family in a year,” she says. “It’s literally that crazy.”

This is an area she is intent on rectifying. Similarly, Poh is bemused whenever people praise her good fortune.

“I’m so lucky because I work 16-hour days all the time and make lots of sacrifices because I have no friends any more,” she laughs, good-naturedly, but in all sincerity.

She credits Adelaide with being sympathetic to an artistic lifestyle and a refuge of quietude to a creative soul.



**“Everyone thinks I make these amazing dinners all the time at home, but I don’t. Just ask my husband.”**



Image: NERIDA PHILLIPS

## POH'S FAVOURITE FOODS



“For dessert: definitely crème caramel.”



“I love comfort food, so mountains of noodles, any variety, pasta and more pasta.”



“Anything French, especially beef bourguignon.”

## POH'S PANTRY STAPLES

“I always have tons of herbs growing in my garden. They're my favourite staple. Of all the things I grow, they're the most reliable. If you've got herbs, you can inject life into things that otherwise might be quite boring. I love thyme and parsley; they're my favourites. I have chives, spring onions, oregano, sage and tons of mint - chocolate and regular - and oregano. I also love passionfruit daisy, which can be infused in teas without losing their intense flavour.

“I use black salt, as it leaves a seasoning trail.

“I also have really nice parmesan cheese, pasta, rice (brown and jasmine) and always your basics: eggs, butter and cream, because I love to bake.”

“For that reason, I will always be loyal to it,” she says.

“I like the friendly vibe of it and all the things that I love are there (family and friends).”

Balance is a commodity that Poh is continually tweaking in her personal life and culinary realm.

Appearing at the Porter Davis World of Style Masterclass series in late April to a packed house of eager-eyed home cooks and professionals, Poh reassures her culinary fan base that “everything is rescue-able”.

“Patience is the best ingredient a chef can possess,” Poh says. “There is no right or wrong.”

As she mixes, dices (“brunoise” in French), thinly slices raw fish (“try not to saw”), espouses the French and Chinese duality for culinary precision, yet almost forgets the sweetly perfumed Szechuan pepper in the garnish for her tuna carpaccio, and exclaims of the accompanying dressing, “I’m sorry, this looks so gross” (she is wrong), her audience is transfixed on her every word and energetic move.

In fact, the motto derived from

her popular guest spot could best be described as ‘let not technical blunder turn charm asunder’.

Making endless jibes about running out of bowls, over-boiling the balsamic syrup for her strawberry and roasted almond-topped pavlova and endless apologies about being a messy cook, Poh counters that “I told you I was a comedy act: nothing goes right for me live”.

Yet nothing could be further from the truth. She had the ravenous crowd, hungry for a slice of the inimitable Poh factor, eating out of the palm of her hand.

As she darted here, there and everywhere in search of culinary equilibrium, she alighted upon the notion that “I feel like Oprah, I’m Poh-prah,” she quipped.

When an audience member retorted: “When do we get our free car?” she replied, “I don’t have any cars, but I do have food samples”.

With a taste-tempting dessert to follow her refreshingly zesty tuna carpaccio starter, this proffered sufficient compensation.

Training her avid onlookers on correct zesting methods, Poh relishes the zing





of fresh ginger and orange zest. In fact, she has a 'zest bank' at Jamface, which when it dips, requires immediate replenishment. Her personality is abundantly loaded with endless supplies. Despite efforts to the contrary, her Italian-inspired pavlova is proving too popular to remove from her café menu, which features comfort food and baked fare at its rustic best.

"Who's good at making pav? I'm actually pretty bad at it," she says, recommending the Coles brand for time-poor home cooks. But the proof is in the pudding: a textural treat, achieving maximum crunch in the outer shell, laced with Poh's refreshingly tart Greek yoghurt, mascarpone and vanilla bean-paste cream topping. The balsamic syrup provided a luscious, velvety foil and flecks of baby herbs freshened the palate.

Speaking of inspired creativity, she lists her top two favourite celebrity chefs as Nigella Lawson, for not only her obvious culinary appeal but also wordsmith prowess, and Antonio Carluccio for his enduring kitchen creed: mof mof (otherwise known as maximum of flavour, minimum of fuss).

This maxim epitomises Poh's food philosophy to a tee.

It's hard to believe her claim of not knowing how to cook properly before appearing on *MasterChef*.

"Everyone thinks I make these amazing dinners all the time at home, but I don't," she insists "Just ask my husband." Her husband of three years and long-time partner is Jono Bennett, who was a production crewman during her *MasterChef* tenure.

The *MasterChef* experience not only thrust the effervescent yet also introverted contestant into the limelight, but it provided a steep learning curve about emerging from one's shell.

In fact, Poh says she was so shy as a child that she had trouble getting through school. Her legion of fans, swamping her after the World of Style demonstration, may beg to differ. But this is an aspect of public life that was forewarned by the *MasterChef* hosts and she has trained herself to become used to it.

An enduring work ethic and never-say-die approach was also a legacy of her gruelling grounding in the *MasterChef* kitchen.

"With any job, it is a craft that you have to hone," she says.

"And that takes patience, time, falling over and getting back on the horse and lots of self doubt. It's not just physically hard, but also mentally challenging."

As the evergreen chef approaches her mid-40s, energy and time are the two ingredients she most fears running out of.

Emigrating from Kuala Lumpur with her parents and brother to Australia at age nine, Poh's Malaysian-Chinese heritage is exemplified in the art of cooking and her artwork.

Many of her works centre on themes of origin and destination. Thought-provoking yet whimsical paintings, mostly acrylic on canvas, subtly and playfully bridge the East-West divide. She has had solo shows in Sydney and Melbourne and is represented at Hill Smith Gallery in Adelaide.

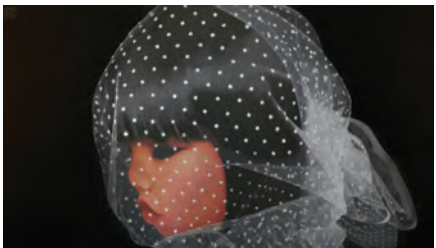
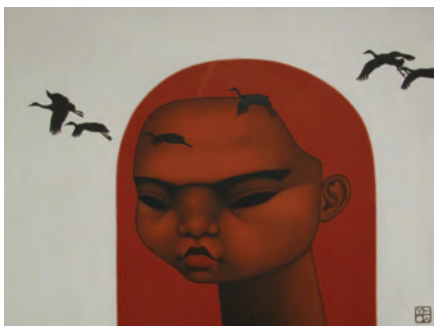
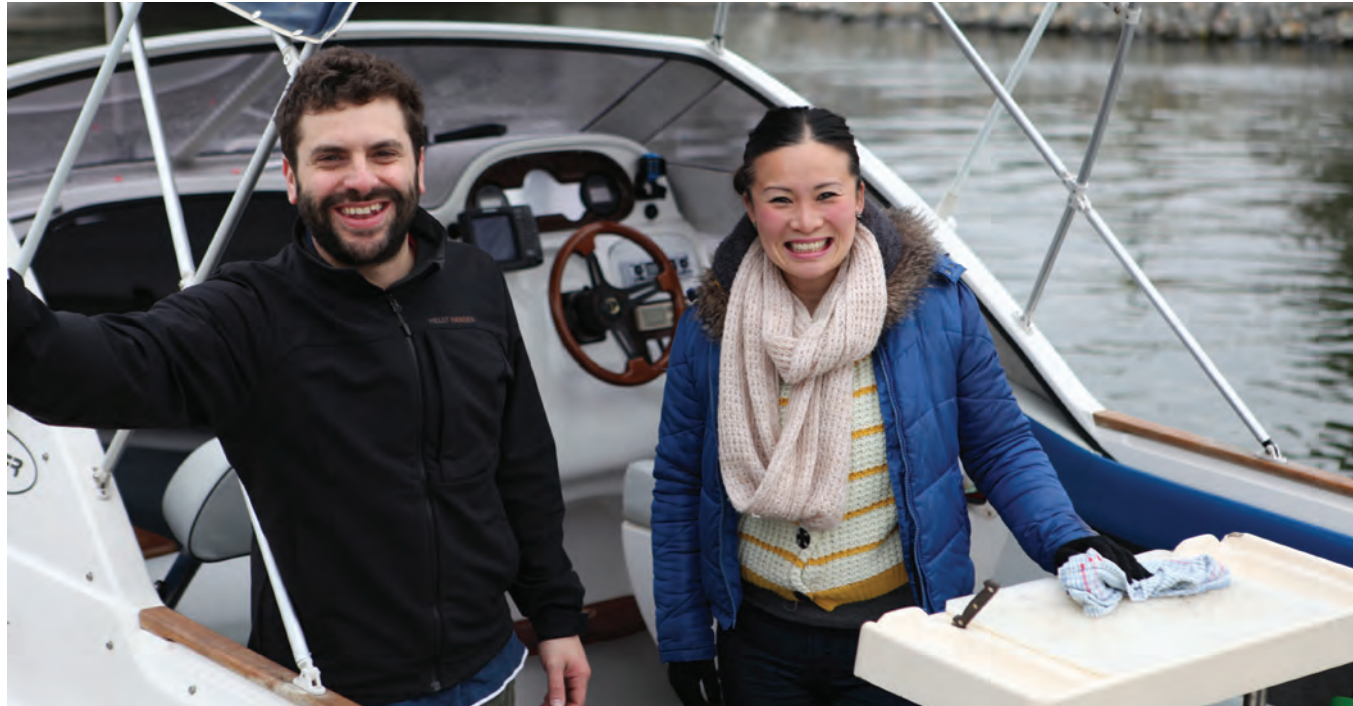
South-East Asian flavours also feature strongly in her cooking repertoire. Poh's favourite regional dish is the fragrantly heady Assam Laksa, which she describes as a vibrant, spice-laden specialty. Traditionally a fish-head

Working 16-hour days is the price Poh pays for the freedom to run her cafe, Jamface, at Adelaide Central Market. She describes the labour of love: "I have this child called Jamface and it is taking up a lot of my time."

Scottish terriers Rhino and Tim are among Poh's menagerie, which includes two budgerigars and a beehive

Images: SBS PUBLICITY





soup, the base broth is made from fish, tamarind and ginger flower, resulting in a sour, fragrant soup, served with chewy, translucent noodles and garnished with the lively flavours of fresh pineapple, cucumber, red onion, torch ginger and shrimp molasses.

"When I was young and training myself to eat spicy food, it got me over the line and gave me my chilli wings," Poh laughs. She often erupts into the kind of hearty, full-throated laugh that is at once endearing and disarming. Poh concedes that the shrimp molasses is "sweet and yummy, but possibly an acquired taste".

Poh's infectious personality is anything but acquired and her creative potential also knows no bounds.

In addition to her illustrative and graphic design background, Poh also achieved kudos as a make-up artist, counting L'Oreal, Megan Gale and Lisa Ho among clientele.

Elements of Poh's Chinese heritage feature not only in her artistic work but also in her kitchen, including the goldfish, a symbol of prosperity and good luck in Chinese culture. She has a Chinese urn filled with fish, which provide endless hours of tranquillity: an ideal foil to her bustling lifestyle.

You can't hurry love, so to speak. Similarly, she savours the visual alchemy of watching her cakes rise in the oven as akin to the ultimate viewing pleasure.

A preference for low-key pastimes,

including pottering around the garden and op shopping, provide restoration and inspiration.

She also counts beloved Scottish terriers Rhino and Tim, two budgerigars and a beehive among her menagerie.

Poh loves her home kitchen but concedes that it is definitely not ideal, citing a universal need for extra bench space.

Everything is on show, much like the owner's personality: what you see is what you get.

"I love everything out; pots and pans hanging everywhere; knives where you can grab them," she says.

A self-proclaimed maximalist, every square inch is covered with trinkets and objets d'or, which are redolent with slices of interesting history.

"I'm a hoarder, but I'm trying to cull the habit," she laughs.

The creative process of art and cooking is intertwined and fuels her artistic passions. Poh says she employs both realms "to procrastinate for the other".

"If I'm painting and I'm having a trouble spot, I'll run downstairs, bake a cake and think through it," she says.

Artistic influences and the freeform courage of classic luminaries such as Picasso, Frida Kahlo and personal favourite Joan Miro provide endless inspiration.

Poh says the overriding impression of these artists' need to create and inherent vitality of their work is an energising force.

"Someone like Picasso was never a victim of his own branding," she says. "He went through a period and if he became bored with it, he would move on again. And it was always about pushing the boundaries, remaining inspired and having that insatiable curiosity about things you don't know yet. All these artists' work speaks of that, and this is why I love it."

The "bravery" in this evolutionary approach to art is distinct from her disciplined and methodical background in graphic and illustrative design, which requires more precise replication and less explosive expressions on canvas.

"My work is quite controlled, so I think it's why I like the work (of the masters) so much, as it is something I feel that I lack," she adds. "That's what I am always trying to break out of, and I think I will eventually."

She traditionally applies design principles of replicating her work on to canvas.

"There's not much wild splashing of paint," she says.

"I get frustrated with myself because I want to make that kind of wild work and I know I can and I have, but it's not natural to my personality."

Not that Poh is anything less than dynamic in person, creatively and kitchen-command mode.

The so-called 'idiot thing' that catapulted her successful culinary career proved a genius move. ■

IMAGES (clockwise from top)

Poh works on her herb garden in her suburban backyard vegetable garden

Visiting fellow *MasterChef* contestant and successful restaurateur Andre Ursini is all part of the fun of filming *Poh & Co*  
Images: SBS PUBLICITY

Poh's artwork includes *Time Traveller 2*, 120 x 213cm, acrylic on canvas, 2012  
*Bird Brain*, 120 x 90cm, acrylic on canvas, 2011  
Images: HILL SMITH GALLERY



# POH'S MARSHMALLOW PAVLOVA WITH STRAWBERRIES, BALSAMIC & BASIL

Serves 8

## MERINGUE

175g egg whites  
pinch of salt  
200g caster sugar  
2 tbs cornflour

## FILLING

250g mascarpone cheese  
250g Greek yoghurt  
1 tsp vanilla bean paste  
60g icing sugar

## BITS & PIECES

1 punnet (350g) fresh strawberries, tops discarded, sliced  
2 tbs icing sugar mixture  
60ml aged balsamic vinegar  
1/2 cup roasted almonds, roughly chopped  
1 punnet micro basil

Preheat oven to 170C fan forced. To make the pavlova, whisk the egg whites with the salt with an electric cake mixer on the highest setting until medium peaks form. Add the sugar one tablespoon at a time, whisking well between additions, until all the sugar is used up. Reduce to the lowest setting and whisk in the cornflour until combined. Spread the mixture evenly on a lined baking tray, about 33 x 24cm, reduce the heat to 150C and bake for 30 minutes. Cool completely before dividing the pavlova into 16 equal pieces.

To make the filling, whisk all the filling ingredients in a medium mixing bowl until just combined. Set aside.

To sweeten the strawberries, combine them with the icing sugar, fold and refrigerate for 15 minutes.

To serve, place a piece of pavlova on each of the eight plates, place a dollop of the filling cream on each piece, then repeat with another layer. Divide the strawberries over the eight plates, drizzle a teaspoon of the aged balsamic over each serve together with a teaspoon full of almonds, then dot the top with a few leaves of the micro basil. Serve immediately.



Image: NERIDA PHELAN