

Maggie BEER The full flavour



The 'country cook' who became a culinary legend introduced the Barossa's pheasant, quince and verjuice to Australian households, and products bearing her name are a byword for originality and quality. **Maggie Beer** explains a philosophy guided by taste and flavour.

HHW Your energy and stamina are legendary and don't seem to be slowing – how do you keep it up? Do you exercise or have any injuries or weak spots you have to watch?

MAGGIE Having just turned 70, I'm well aware of the years I've spent on my feet! But I do love walking along the roads where we live in the Barossa – it never feels like exercise but of course it is. Walking, either before or after my day, always helps to recharge me, so I try to incorporate that into every day no matter where I might be.

HHW 'Gourmet' is still often associated with expense and rich or fatty food. Do you ever feel pressured to offer low-fat products?

MAGGIE Because my whole journey with food

has always been based on what my palate deems delicious, I've never felt pressured to include low-fat options as part of my range, simply because I don't choose to eat them myself. I've always gone with the notion of having a moderate serve of something closer to its origins, rather than looking to an altered, reduced-fat version.

HHW The Maggie Beer Foundation promotes better food in the residential aged care sector, which you've said should follow more a lifestyle than medical model. People who have a heart or diabetes risk factor are also advised medically on diet and told tinned or frozen foods are okay nutritionally. What is your feeling around this?

MAGGIE I'm driven by flavour, seasonality, balance and natural foods. Tinned and frozen foods may be nutritious but flavour is always my measure.

HHW You were one of the first Australian 'foodies' to champion fresh, seasonal and locally grown produce. The message is often heard now but at the same time globalisation and the pace of life has made fulfilling it trickier. Buying imported or takeaway food can be cheaper or easier – how do we prevent 'local and ripe' becoming an elite privilege?

MAGGIE The first thought that springs to mind is to have a veggie patch! Anything homegrown will always be cheaper and healthier than bought produce, but I'm also aware this isn't an option for everyone, so the ever-increasing amount of local farmers' markets is wonderful to see become part of our regular shopping options.

Local produce is bound to be fresher because of the limited distance it is required to travel but there are things I can't live without that don't or can't grow in my region. When we talk of 'low food miles' we should keep that in context. There are also some 'better for you' takeaway choices than others, and I think that's what it's all about, adding in the good things each day, rather than getting too caught up in what we're doing wrong.

The more we make good food choices, the better we feel and the less inclined to look to convenience as the deciding factor. We use flavour as our benchmark and we support Australian farmers or we risk our food security.

HHW *The Cook and the Chef* TV show paired you with the Hilton's executive chef Simon Bryant and brought your ideas and energy into households the nation over. What were the most valuable lessons you learnt from Simon over the four years?

MAGGIE Simon has so much passion for what he does but never lets things get overly serious to the point he forgets to enjoy himself. We had the same philosophy about produce, which confirmed so much in which I believed. I value his generosity in sharing his producers and his ability to explain the science of food in such an approachable way – and his cheekiness of course...

HHW Autumn must hold special meaning to someone who grows produce because it's the traditional harvest and food-preserving time. Are there any meats, however, we should be making more use of?

MAGGIE Beef is a wonderful autumn meat, as is pheasant if you can source it, and partridge.

HHW You're credited with the modern revival of verjuice, a medieval condiment similar to vinegar but gentler, when a winemaker helped you produce it from unsold grapes in 1984. Other traditions use crab apples and lemons. Have you considered these or cumquats?

MAGGIE I have often thought about different ways of making verjuice, but for me it always comes back to what we have on hand, and grapes are aplenty in our line of farming. So, for equal measures of providence and flavour, I keep returning to the tradition of grape-based verjuice.

HHW You've also promoted extra-virgin olive oil, particularly from the Barossa Valley. Does the method of pressing also matter and is it the best all-purpose cooking oil to use?

MAGGIE I couldn't be without good extra-virgin olive oil in my kitchen, so for me it is the best all-rounder unless making mayonnaise, which calls for something milder in flavour. We take the pressing of our olives very seriously – there is nothing better than extra-virgin olive oil the moment it's crushed. I'm always present as the first olives go through, and I check the oil is just as I like it: beautifully balanced flavour and such freshness in colour and aroma.

HHW Lemon myrtle, macadamias, avocados, persimmons etc. were once obscure or exotic but became cash crops and now we are seeing starfruit, sapotes, dragon fruit, etc. Should we continue cultivating introduced produce or is it bad for our ecosystem?

MAGGIE The most important thing to me is working with the climate and that includes planting plants in regions where both the climate and water supply are naturally compatible. When you list the plants above, the only indigenous one is the macadamia and lemon myrtle. All others have been introduced.

HHW How is your Foundation going?

MAGGIE My full efforts have been given to the establishment and ongoing impact of my Foundation over the last year and I'm so excited by the results we are already seeing. The Foundation only began in May last year and we started green and idealistic. At times it seems a slow burn when there is so much you would like to do but the joy and energy has come from finding so many people doing wonderful work in so many fields and the ability to share ideas so we can all do things better. It's intoxicating to continually learn! ♥



MAGGIE'S FAVOURITE

- Red wine
Pheasant Farm
Homeblock Shiraz
- Cookbook author
Stephanie Alexander
- Exercise
Walking and Pilates
- Film
Babette's Feast
- Jewellery
Pearls