



Mehigan OF LIFE

A beautifully decorated period home proves that good taste extends beyond Gary Mehigan's kitchen. By Jenna Meade

Gary Mehigan's bookshelf is lined with cookbooks from the world's best chefs, but it's the work of his former *MasterChef Australia* prodigies that takes pride of place in his office and his heart.

"We already have a *MasterChef* legacy, and that makes me quite proud," he says, pointing out books from Julie Goodwin, Poh Ling Yeow and *Junior MasterChef*'s Isabella and Sofia Bliss.

The adored TV judge is showing us through his Malvern East home, which he shares with wife Mandy, daughter Jenna, dogs Fergus and Molly, and cat Bellamy.

His office is a room of favourites. There's the big black leather chair that he gets comfortable in at the end of a day writing recipes or menus, and the treasured photo of himself with fellow *MasterChef* judges Matt Preston and George Calombaris.

"This was taken a few years back, but it's my favourite one of the three of us so far," Gary says.

He is warm and genuine, and has a friendly presence, which makes you feel immediately at home.

The couple bought the late-1800s house five years ago, fulfilling their dream of owning a home of its era.

It has four bedrooms, three bathrooms, a formal lounge and a serene greenery-lined outdoor area with pool and sprawling veggie patch, which extends down one side of the house.

There are raised garden beds with zucchinis, tomatoes, kale, wildflowers for Jenna, and almond, lemon and passionfruit trees.

Gary points out some of his extra-special plantings — there's the curry leaf tree he's "obsessed with" and the garlic he was gifted from Jamieson, the area where Chinese immigrants first planted the bulb in Victoria.

Inside, the harmonious styling was completed by Mandy. The pair initially hired a stylist, but Gary's wife quickly discovered she knew what she wanted and could achieve it herself.

The result is a complementary mix of muted and neutral tones, with added texture from artwork and rugs.





“I REALLY ONLY NEED A COUPLE OF THINGS — SOME REALLY SHARP KNIVES, THREE OR FOUR HEAVY DUTY, NON-STICK POTS AND PANS, AND A CHOPPING BLOCK.”

FAR LEFT: The long Victorian ash table takes pride of place in the dining room.

MAIN: Gary prefers not to spend too much time in the kitchen at home. **LEFT** A Vitamix and new coffee machine gleam on the kitchen bench. **ABOVE** Laguiole cutlery, bought on a visit to France, has a quality look and feel.

Photos: Eugene Hyland

“We were conscious not to spend silly amounts of money on furniture because you outgrow the pieces — styles change,” Mandy says. “The cat has shredded the couch and the bedhead, but that’s life.”

There are soaring ceilings and polished hardwood floors, and Aboriginal artwork and pieces by Catherine Pilgrim and close friend Jeff Martin adorn the walls.

Gary laughs as he points out the one piece of furniture he chose — the long Victorian ash table, which takes centre stage in the dining room.

“It’s the only concession I was allowed. It had to be wide — I love cooking and putting the plates down the centre of the table for everyone to enjoy.”

The pair renovated to allow extra room for a teenage retreat for Jenna and ample space and features for outdoor entertaining. It’s a popular house for get-togethers.

“We follow the sun,” Gary says. “In summer we’ll have barbecues out on the deck, and in winter we’ll go around to the back of the house and use the pizza oven.”

The kitchen is surprisingly simple. The only added touches before moving in were an extra oven and a wine fridge — another dream fulfilled for Gary. Large windows let in natural light, a Vitamix and new coffee

machine have pride of place on the bench, and ample cupboards house Gary’s tools.

“I really only need a couple of things — some really sharp knives, three or four heavy duty, non-stick pots and pans, and a chopping block,” he says. “The one we’ve got in there is 25 years old.”

And Gary never throws anything out. “If you need to borrow anything, chances are I’ve got it,” he laughs. “I’ve got a cupboard filled with everything from slow cookers to roasting pans and piping bags.”

While he’s an esteemed chef with a mind filled with incredible recipes, Gary admits he doesn’t like to spend too much time cooking.

“I’m frustrated if I’m in the kitchen for more than 30-45 minutes,” he says. “I think, ‘I’m a professional chef, why am I still in here?’”

It’s a view shared by daughter Jenna, 16, who Gary proudly proclaims is a whiz in the kitchen.

“For a girl who says she doesn’t like cooking, she knows a lot about food,” he says. “I catch her making little concoctions. Her techniques are good — I see her using a hot pan and caramelising, but I’m not allowed to say anything.”

Winter is Gary’s favourite time of year, when he’ll cook up one-pot meals or curries. Another tried and tested recipe is his “walking the dog chicken”. >>



GARY'S FAVOURITE FIVE

DOCKET PRINT: This (pictured below) is the perfect illustration of a busy kitchen, and I love the memories from that period when I was working at the Sofitel in the '90s. It reminds me that I was young once. Regardless of what you see on TV, with the glamour and the glory, cooking and hospitality is a wonderful melting pot of people from all over the world. You go home tired and dirty, but you've created so many dishes and made so many people happy.

VITAMIX: I'm trying to be healthier at the moment, so this is helping me with morning smoothies. Once upon a time it was aspirational to have one of these in a commercial kitchen, so it's really nice to have one at home.

LAGUIOLE CUTLERY: We got these during a trip to France. We're real Francophiles and try to go there when we visit our family in the UK. Chefs are obsessed with the shape of a spoon, and there's something really beautiful about how these feel in the hand. These can actually pick up peas.

OFFICE CHAIR: I'll sit in there and unwind, reading and flicking through cookbooks. It's where I gather inspiration. I love that it gets more comfortable the longer I sit on it.

JAPANESE SAKE CUPS: We bought these from a lovely little shop in Kyoto selling artisan pottery. We drank sake for the whole trip, and I came home with a whole new appreciation for the drink. It's fascinating. Like craft beer here, it's being made by these cool, young bearded guys.



"I stick the chicken on the barbecue rotisserie, take the dogs for a walk for about an hour and 15 minutes, and it's done," he says. "I'll add baby carrots and potatoes, and they'll cook beautifully, drenched in the chicken fat."

Matt Preston and George Calombaris are regular guests, with the three rotating between houses for cook-ups, allocating a theme to each dinner.

"People don't believe it, but we are actually friends outside of the show," Gary says. "We mix it up and like to eat in and out often. When we eat at home, everyone brings a plate. Matt likes to shock and



always tries to get one over the professionals, like the last time where he made instant ice cream out of frozen fruit, egg white and icing sugar in a blender. It was genius."

With season nine of *MasterChef* underway, Gary admits he has gone into this year's offering more eager than ever before.

"There's something very comfortable and very enjoyable about this year," he says. "At the beginning I was a bit hesitant to invest my time in people because I wondered if they were doing it for the fame or for the passion. There's a lot of emotion that goes into being a judge, but over the years I've grown to have no qualms or hesitations."

The past eight years have been a fast-paced but rewarding journey for Gary, who also oversees his Boathouse restaurant on the banks of the Maribyrnong River, as well as other passion projects.

He says he feels proud to have helped inspire a new generation of budding chefs.

"People who have grown up with the program have a completely different idea about food — the knowledge some 18 or 19-year-olds have about food blows me away," Gary says. "This is a new generation of thinking about food — and it's not only us that has influenced that, but we've definitely played a solid role."

As well as being constantly inspired and influenced by the bright minds of home chefs, Gary is quick to name the best part of his job. "We love going to work when the food is good," he says. "We're very childish and very simple about how we appreciate our jobs. If the food is good, we're happy." ■

MasterChef Australia is on Channel 10, Sunday to Thursday

FROM LEFT: Fergus finds a comfortable spot outside, cookbooks from all over the world adorn the office bookshelves (above); and, in the corner, a comfy leather chair is where Gary likes to write recipes and menus.





“I STICK THE CHICKEN ON THE BARBECUE ROTISSERIE, TAKE THE DOGS FOR A WALK FOR ABOUT AN HOUR AND 15 MINUTES, AND IT’S DONE.”

