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# Toffee apple 10 years in creation becomes MasterChef semi-final challenge

DANI VALENT July 19 2020



Chef Martin Benn has set an epic toffee apple project for tonight's semi-final. *Photo: Eddie Jim*

What does a top chef do in isolation? If you're Martin Benn you spend a few weeks looking at an apple before deciding to go at it with a lathe. You then shave it into a two-metre strip and painstakingly reconstruct it into the form of a toffee apple, albeit spread with caramel, slowly baked, stuffed with miso caramel and raspberry sauce, dressed with salted white chocolate cream and sour apple jelly, and surrounded by elaborate, edible leaves.

This epic apple project – all 110 steps and three hours 45 minutes of it – is tonight's semi-final elimination challenge on *MasterChef Australia*. It's the dish which will send either Reynold, Emelia or Laura home, leaving the other two to cook for glory in Monday's grand final.

"I had toffee apples growing up in England so it's about that nostalgia, but it's also an evolution of 10 years of technique honed at Sepia," says Benn.

Sepia is the three-hat Sydney restaurant that Benn and his partner Vicki Wild closed in 2018. The pair then [moved to Melbourne to open a restaurant](#) with Chin Chin owner Chris Lucas. The pandemic has delayed the project at 80 Collins Street but they're still hoping to open towards the end of the year, and Benn plans to put his elaborate toffee apple on the menu.

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Developing the *MasterChef* dish at home had its challenges.

"I only had a small bench to work at and I had to keep running to the shops to buy three or four apples or a carton of cream," says Benn. "It took weeks to clean up too."

Once he was happy with the recipe, he timed himself preparing each stage, then assisted the *MasterChef* team with a rigorous testing process before they filmed the episode.



Sneak peek: Benn's Toffee Apple dessert. *Photo: Network Ten*

Watching the contestants cook his toffee apple was exciting and nerve-wracking. "The contestants are amazing," says Benn.

"You don't understand how good they are until you see them work. It's an intense and super-competitive environment and they have the intelligence, concentration, precision and timing to create a dish on the first go that uses techniques I've developed over 10 years. A lot of accomplished chefs wouldn't be able to do it. Personally, I would never put myself through what they do."

He would employ any of them in a flash. "They are 100 per cent qualified to work," he says. "They're all very talented."

However, Benn does question whether the restaurant environment now and into the future will support such labour-intensive endeavour.

"In a restaurant situation, it would be really difficult to justify the labour it takes to create a dish like that," he says. "That's one reason a lot of restaurant food is getting dumbed down

and simplified. It's a shame to think that this kind of technical complexity and surprise would be lost."

A commitment to the theatre of dining is one reason he's excited to open a bold new fine dining restaurant in Melbourne.

"I'm thrilled to do something new," he says. "It's going to be all about fun. I want Melbourne to have something to look forward to and we want to give Australia something to celebrate."

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