



KIDS IN THE KITCHEN

AN ARMY OF CHEFS IS RISING THROUGH THE RANKS, STORMING KITCHENS ACROSS THE GLOBE. THIS LEGION OF FOODIES IS STEPPING INTO THE BATTLE-ZONE TO TACKLE THE SEASONED MASTERS. AND THEY'RE STARTING YOUNG

WORDS | GISELLE WHITEAKER

Dylan Carter is in the kitchen, cooking

up a storm. He confidently plucks ingredients from the bench-top, mixing, kneading, drizzling and adding a dash of this and a pinch of that. Dylan is an expert chef, presenting dishes that are gourmet works of art. But while the beef may be aged, the chef isn't. Dylan is only 15 years old, yet he's already dazzling diners across Australia with his culinary skills. And he's not alone. A host of young chefs is bringing fresh twists on food and health-aware perspectives into the world's kitchens.

Canadian Luke Hayes-Alexander is 23, but he's been around food his whole life. "I grew up in the industry, pretty much since the age of one. At 11, I decided I wanted to become a chef," he says. "I don't think many 11-year-olds think that deeply about food, but my friends kind of understood it because every kid has their own thing that interests them. For most it's sports or arts or something. For me it was food," Luke continues. "They didn't mind – I brought snacks."

This passion directed Luke through four years of self-study, where he read every food-related book he could lay his hands on. At 15 he became executive chef at the family restaurant – a huge responsibility for a young lad. "Back then, I was really shy – I could barely interact with people," says the now-gregarious Luke. "For my first interview I was barely able to talk. I was just thinking 'let me get back in the kitchen.'"

From the moment he walked into the kitchen something clicked. "People would come to the restaurant after a crazy day at work, they'd be stressed out, then they'd get their food and 'Ahhh', they'd kick back and relax. It really got me thinking that I wanted to be part of what happened in the kitchen. If food could be that powerful, it must be pretty special," Luke explains.

Luke's fondness for food hasn't diminished in the slightest. He's recently moved to Toronto, where he's been hosting supper clubs, pop-ups and guest events. He'll soon be

offering cooking lessons, too. "There's definitely enough to keep it fresh. There's always something to discover and to learn. I'm sure it'll branch out in multiple directions and I'll be doing things in five years that I wasn't expecting to be doing," he says.

Britain's youngest head chef, 20-year-old Luke Thomas, feels the same way. "It's such a fun business to be in, the world of food. The way it's developing there are masses of opportunities. Food is a big part of everybody's life so it's a really exciting industry," he says. He also cites his "tweens" as the defining age. "I'd cooked at home from the age of three and the world of TV chefs became really big while I was growing up, so that was quite a big inspiration. Especially Jamie [Oliver] – he inspired a generation of people," he adds.

The rise of food TV has undoubtedly played a role in inspiring this new batch of chefs. From *My Kitchen Rules* to *Saturday Kitchen*, programmes are making food accessible and exciting. "Things like *MasterChef* inspired me," confirms Dylan, whose stint on *Junior MasterChef* when he was 12 was his launching pad into the culinary world. Fast-forward three years and he's cooked with celebrity chefs and done pop-ups, including one recently with the *Australian Good Food Guide*.

Despite being the master of his kitchen, Dylan comes across as a typical teen. "I want to finish school and possibly go to university. I'd probably do business studies, which would be helpful in running a restaurant. Or chemistry. Or something like that," he says, although he's also interested in international work experience. "There's a couple of restaurants I'd love to go to. There's one in Spain in San Sebastian called Mugaritz and there's a couple in America – Manresa in California and the other one is called Coi," he says, rattling off establishments of Michelin-starred chefs.

At 16, twins Sofia and Isabella Bliss are in high school and dream of opening a restaurant. The siblings were stars of the first *Junior MasterChef* in Australia, with Isabella winning and Sofia ranking a respectable third. "I loved watching the show so when I heard about auditions I was really excited and spent days cooking all different things and giving myself practice challenges," Sofia says. "I remember that Sofia and I thought it would be wonderful to cook our favourite Sicilian recipes on TV. I love cooking shows, and *MasterChef* was one of the shows I watched the most," adds Isabella.

Since then, the girls have published a cookbook, *A Little Bit Of This, A Little Bit Of That*, which sold out. "I remember typing up the recipes and testing them and then having to cook them for the photo shoot. We then got to eat all the food – this part was definitely the hardest" laughs Sofia.

"I definitely think it is important for young people to explore food and cooking because it is essential for staying healthy and eating the right foods. Learning about what food is made of and where it originates is a major part of nutritious eating because you understand what is being digested in your body," says Isabella on a more serious note.

The link between cooking and nutrition is something Junior Chefs Academy focus on in their work with schools across the UK. They're determined to instil an appreciation of why healthy food matters at an early age, in the belief that teaching children food skills is a way of laying a foundation for long-term health and wellbeing.

"We work with schools to help illustrate different parts of the curriculum so we might base our workshops around anything from kitchen science to modern languages. When children are studying energy, for example, we look at the value of complex carbohydrates and the sugars, minerals and vitamins present in certain fruits. We often use a 'superfood salad' to illustrate this topic," explains director Sue Cooper. And it's not all about food. "Literacy and numeracy are obviously important if pupils are going to be able to follow a recipe, weigh ingredients and perform calculations about servings and proportions. But we also have workshops that revolve around history, science topics, foreign languages and even a simple introduction to enterprise and economics. It's a question of allowing children the freedom to experiment, to build their confidence, to expand their knowledge and, above all, to have fun with food," she adds.

Sue believes food media could do more. "There is a big audience for food programs, so the makers are in a privileged position; one from which they could, if the will was there, play a positive role in addressing some of the most pernicious health problems facing the developed world," she suggests.

"It's essentially a good thing getting kids interested in food and getting them into the kitchen wanting to try things. So many kids these days don't know how to cook or wouldn't know what to do if they were told to buy some fruit and veggies and make a few things you can have in the fridge as healthy choices," agrees Luke Hayes-Alexander. "If you can inspire them to grab a mortar and pestle and a knife, it's a great thing."

The youth brigade is bringing a health-conscious, sustainable-produce mentality into the kitchen, with the potential to inspire a new generation. Passion for what they believe in, as well as what they do, is evident. "This is what I will do for the rest of my life. I will spend my life around food. It's fun, it's interactive, it's engaging, you're involved with people, it's a fashion business, it changes – it is an exciting industry to be part of," confirms Luke Thomas. 🍴

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IMAGES: Bliss Productions, Dylan Carter, Junior Chefs Academy, Luke Hayes & Luke Thomas

FROM FAR LEFT TO RIGHT: Dylan Carter; Luke Hayes; Luke Thomas; Isabella and Sofia; Junior Chefs Academy.