’I like the deep fried wontons and the spring onion cake’: Constructions of ’Ethnic cuisines’ on Masterchef Australia.

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In recent years, there have been a growing number of reality cooking shows on Australian television. The most highly rated and longest running is MasterChef Australia, which involves a group of home cooks vying for the title of Australia’s best amateur cook. The show appears to portray a slice of modern-day multicultural Australia, both in the variety of contestants and the types of cuisines that are cooked and discussed. However, the depictions of ’ethnic’ cuisines and their relationship to what is considered ’Australian’ appear to be contradictory: on one hand, ’ethnic’ cuisines are exoticised and presented in clichéd and stereotypical ways and sometimes contrasted with authentic ’Aussie’ or Anglo-Australian fare. On the other, ’ethnic’ cuisines are also simultaneously normalised and both the contestants and the audience are expected to have extensive knowledge about all types of cuisines from around the world as if they were everyday foods.

Using critical discourse analysis, this paper investigates the construction of ’ethnic’ (or ’international’) cuisines and how they are exoticised or normalised or both simultaneously on MasterChef Australia’s Season 4 (2012). The discourses of the three judges, the contestants and the framing and setting of the scenes reveal stark inconsistencies about whether non-Anglo-Australian ingredients, cuisines and cooking methods are considered ’Australian’ or not. While conflicting in many ways, these discourses about food and cooking in Australia reflect contemporary uncertainties and confusion about who or what is ’Australian’ in wider Australian discourses of identity and belonging.

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