

Simon Toohey to show off the 'coolness' of veggies at Festive Vegan and Plant-Powered Show

The Festive Vegan and Plant-Powered Show has announced that *MasterChef Australia* finalist Simon Toohey - who came third in last year's competition - has been added to the lineup. The Festive Vegan and Plant-Powered Show will take place on 28 November 2020.

Toohey joins top UK vegan chef Gaz Oakley, aka the Avant-Garde Vegan, award-winning Chef Luke Dale Roberts of The Test Kitchen fame, Zimbabwean Nicola Kagoro aka Chef Cola, and Chef Jay Mac from The Kind Kitchen.



Chef Gaz Oakley to showcase plant-based cooking at Festive Vegan and Plant Powered Show

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His participation in season 11 of *MasterChef Australia* saw him wowing fans with his vegan creations and use of seasonal vegetables. Placing third, Toohey went on to appear in season 12 - also known as *MasterChef Australia: Back to Win* - which was shown on Australian TV earlier this year and has yet to be seen in SA. This series featured former high-achieving contestants from the past eleven series returning for another chance at the title of MasterChef and the R3m prize.

Although Toohey didn't win he has been incredibly busy, he answered a few questions ahead of his appearance at The Festive Vegan and Plant-Powered Show.

When did you start cooking?

I knew the basics from watching my mum cook and helping her sometimes make a few of her classics, like red Thai curry, amazing pasta and Indian curries. She was an amazing cook. I also learned to cook lots of my dad's dishes, which was definitely the more rustic Australian home-style like stews and roasts.

What made you move onto plant-based dishes?

I think the reason I moved towards a plant-based diet was because my partner Georgia is veggie. We just started eating vegetarian meals and then vegan ones. It excited me because it was a challenge to create beautiful food that isn't the same Instagram colourful bowl of raw veg on noodles or rice. I wanted to explore flavour. It's hard sometimes as vegetables are mostly considered a side dish. I wanted to explore how I could make veggies the centrepiece of the table.

Tell us about cooking on *MasterChef*, what is it like to be cooking mostly plant-based meals and do you think you're making more people aware of how delicious veggies can taste?

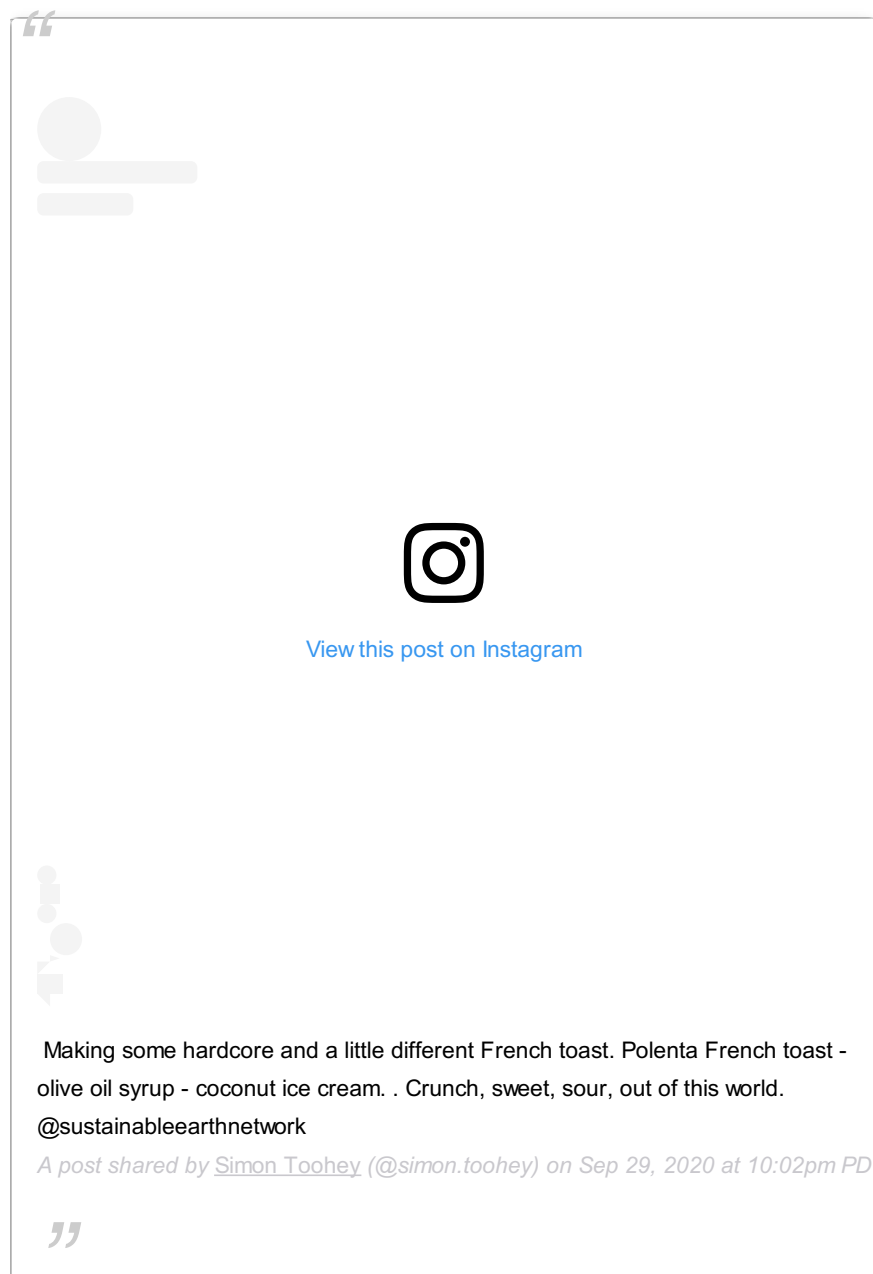


I absolutely loved it when I got the chance to cook just vegetables. I received a lot of messages saying thank you for finally bringing an appreciation for plants to MC, that has been such a meat-heavy show since day dot. I also receive messages

from people telling me that they aren't vegetarian or vegan, yet they really appreciate the fact I cook vegetables as they are interested and want to move in that direction. It's a fantastic feeling. But the best is that mums and dads have stopped me in the street and told me their kids eat veggies now as I've made them 'cool'. Now, 'cool' isn't something I would ever consider myself, but I'll take it.

What have you been up to since competing in *MasterChef Australia* 11 and 12?

I haven't stopped. I have a new show coming out, which is hush-hush at the moment but keep an eye out for it. My business partners and I have also launched the *Sustainable Earth Network*, which focuses on producers aiming to change the way we look at food; look at historical farming techniques but bringing it to the modern time to help us examine what we eat and how we eat in a different way. For example, seaweed, foraging, hemp, hyper-local and indigenous topics. I have been writing my first cookbook, which is all about the world of vegetables and I co-founded a Hard Seltzer company that only uses local and native ingredients – like native ginger, lime and local spirit. I am also the ambassador for Dilmah tea along with their amazing foundation. They are the most ethical tea company in the world and what they are doing for their country and the world is outstanding. And as if that wasn't enough to keep me busy, I am working on a national campaign with The Sauce Bulk Foods, looking to get Australia to make a swap from animals and dairy to plants, changing certain sugars, looking at organics and making ingredients delicious.



***MasterChef Australia* is such a huge show - extremely popular in South Africa. What do you think makes it such a hit?**

I think it's because people care about each other. There are so many shows these days that are so focused on backstabbing, b*tchiness and people being unkind. *MasterChef* shows us that there is compassion and bringing it all together with food is a double winner. It teaches us at the same time engages us and for me, it is an hour's relief from the stresses of all the bad news out there.

There is a growing trend towards a plant-based diet but many are stumped as to how to get started and create a sustainable and tasty life around vegetables. What advice can you give?

It is the unknown that makes it difficult to swap over. We have spent our lives being fed the classic meat and three veg. No wonder when people make the change to a plant-based diet, they are stuck working out how to complete a meal. Three veg just doesn't cut the mustard (so they say). Not only that, but there are only so many bowls of brown rice with red cabbage, a sliced up avo, some tofu, some soy and sesame in a bowl you can eat. Not only that but eating pasta or bread every night to help fill you up doesn't help either. So my advice is: look at one ingredient, whether it's an eggplant, broccoli or cauliflower and find a recipe that makes that awesome. Then add some grains on the side like cracked Bulgur wheat or lentils or couscous. Or when the recipe talks about mince, use mushrooms - they are a fantastic substitute. But finally, what helps me is I cook Indian a lot. They are the royalty of plant-based eating and there is no denying it - they know how to pack in a lot of flavour.

How has Covid-19 impacted you - both professionally and personally?

It's just frustrating. If I was doing what I used to do pre-*MasterChef*, I would be unemployed right now. So I thank my lucky stars that that isn't the case. In saying that, everything would be streets ahead when it comes to work deadlines and goals, so I'm stuck at home when all I want to do is be out there eating, growing, learning and cooking. But in saying that, I have been forced to do all the things I can't stand doing, like paperwork and proposals and pitches and spreadsheets!

What dishes will be on your Christmas menu this year, where will you be celebrating and who with?

I'm about to become an uncle and my brother and his wife just bought a place in the central highlands so we will all be up there. It will be a beautiful table of fresh, summery dishes. Lots of things to snack on and little bits of everything. I love choice and mix-matching flavours.

Tickets for the Festive Vegan and Plant-Powered Show are now available from [Quicket](#).

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