

Experts dwell on matters of good taste

The Best in Australia

7.30pm. LifeStyle

IT says something of where Australia is in its culinary evolution that a program seeking to discover our best rice dish should reference the cuisines of Italy, Spain and China. No curried prawns or rice salad here. Up for consideration is a smoked fish congee, a sassed-up seafood paella and a rich Milanese risotto.

It wasn't so long ago that such dishes would have been thought of as exotic, though to some a congee (Chinese rice porridge) may still seem a little left field. Rice is no longer something that sits between the sweet and sour and the beef and black bean in a takeaway container.

Here is a panel of young folk unable to separate a Chinese peasant staple from a Spanish seaside classic as our best rice recipe.

Or maybe I should go easy on the sense of wonder: such sentiments about our dining habits may be a little too rear-visionist and almost a left-over from cultural cringe.

What *The Best in Australia* does highlight, other than a rather boastful title, is that we have an incredibly varied palate and a healthy appetite for exploring it.

The program brings together Ben "Bender" O'Donoghue (of *Surfing the Menu* fame), Darren Simpson (of Sydney's La Sala restaurant) and former rock singer Anna Gare (who has Perth's Deluxe Catering) in a format tested in the heat of the BBC's food kitchen with *The Best*. (Bender appeared in that version as well.)

What the trio have to do is win over a panel of judges with their take on a theme. Tonight it's the best rice dish and the best chocolate dish.

The congee and paella tied in the first challenge while Darren's bitter chocolate and rum mousse with burnt



Highly palatable: Anna Gare, Ben O'Donoghue and Darren Simpson

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orange sauce beat out Bender's souffle and Anna's chocolate, fig and nut torte.

Last week it was the best kids' veggie snack and kids' meal, useful viewing for anyone who faces the daily struggle to fill little tummies with healthy tucker.

The kids went for Ben's vegetable quesadillas in the first challenge and Anna's "lollipop" lamb chops served

with crispy rice cakes cleverly concealing a good wad of spinach.

Darren is of the school of thought that the greens should be presented openly, so his raw vegetables with avocado dip was a little too in your face for the kids panel. Which just goes to show there are some things you should keep from your kids if you know what's good for them.

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