

Kitchen secrets behind the scenes

Our reporter **Louise Baxter** gives her tastebuds a workout as a guest judge on home-grown cooking show *The Best in Australia*

As a fan of the first two series of the hit cooking show *Best in Australia*, walking on to the set in the converted church warehouse in North Fremantle was rather surreal. The familiar long dining table was there, elegantly dressed, with the spiral staircase in the background and the very Fremantle, bohemian decor looking just as it does on screen. The room I most wanted to see was the kitchen but as I was there to help judge it was off limits until the end.

This WA-made show, now entering its third season, pits chefs, larrikin Aussie Ben O'Donoghue and award-winning Irishman Darren Simpson, against skilled cook Anna

Gare, challenging them to prepare the best dish using the same ingredient or theme with the winner chosen by a panel of judges.

I was invited to appear as a guest judge, a role that producer Alun Bartsch labelled "the best free feed in WA".

Since recording the show in March, I have been inundated with questions from people.

Does the food taste as good as it looks? Do the presenters really get on that well? Is it true you don't know who cooked which dish? The answer to all of those is yes.

Before we arrived, I and fellow judges Miles and Jo were told the two

categories of dishes we would taste: best smoked main and best avocado main. While waiting for the first course, we sipped Margaret River wines and Little Creatures brews.

Our guesses between courses were futile; the dishes were highly creative, beautifully presented and unlike anything we could have imagined.

That is why we were on that side of the set.

Choosing a winner was as difficult as it looks. I would have paid good money for any of the six plates we tried.

They really did taste as good as they appear on television.

I was most excited to head into the kitchen and meet the presenters.



Tucking in: Louise Baxter, left, with fellow judges Miles and Jo.

Following the results, we did briefly discuss our decision and the dishes. The winners gave the empty-handed presenter a good-natured ribbing, as the crew made bets for the next day's proceedings.

Our feedback was graciously received. Ben, Darren and Anna were great fun, continuing the witty banter that is so successful on screen.

I even picked up some additional tips for the road. So, after half a day of eating, drinking wine and discussing food, what was the first thing I wanted to do when I got home? Cook.

The Best in Australia Series 3 premieres on Saturday at 7:30pm (EST) on LifeStyle FOOD.
