

Khanh Ong Podcast @ 320kbps.mp3

[00:00:00] Interviewer

Welcome to the Inner West Libraries Speaker Series. Before we begin today, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal People of the Eora Nation on which this podcast is produced and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging from across all lands this podcast reaches.

Today we will be talking to Khanh Ong about his debut cookbook, *A Gay Guy's Guide to Life Love Food*, published by Pan Macmillan. Khanh shares his favourite family recipes passed down through generations and giving an insight into his family history.

Vietnamese classics such as prawn and pork, spring rolls or tamarind crab. There are recipes to make for and with your mates, meals to help heal a broken heart. Khanh also includes the meals he loves to cook to impress a new date or if you just feel like being basic and keeping things simple, there are recipes for you too. Khanh Ong has a passion for Asian flavours, and with his infectious smile, cheeky sense of humour and captivating story, he quickly became a Master Chef. Season 10 fan favourite. Khanh was born in an Indonesian refugee camp to Vietnamese parents and grew up in the suburbs of Melbourne and family and heritage have always influenced the way he cooks. Khanh is an accomplished DJ and has studied fashion design and worked as a stylist. He's currently at the George on Collins in Melbourne, where he has revamped the menu and created a space where food is not just eaten but experienced. Welcome, Khanh

[00:01:33] Khanh

Hello. Hello. What an introduction. That was so nice.

[00:01:36] Interviewer

Oh, thank you for that. What's the weather like in Melbourne?

[00:01:40] Khanh

It's actually quite beautiful today. I just bought a compost put together just right before our conversation. It was hilarious because my housemate is so deadly scared of worms, but it's the perfect day to get up on compost together.

[00:01:53] Interviewer

Oh, wonderful. Wonderful. Ok Khanh congratulations on your debut cookbook. Can you tell us about your other career choices and how all roads lead you back to food?

[00:02:06] Khanh

Oh, I feel like I've done so many different jobs in my life. I'm 27 now and I feel like I've done like I've changed careers like three or four times. After uni, I went straight into fashion school. So after high school I went straight into fashion school, studied that, worked as a stylist for a little while, total fun, loved it, would still do it if I could on the side. But while I was doing that, I was also a DJ and that became really lucrative for me. So I kept doing it for about six, seven years and it became it became quite good of a career. I was travelling around the world, around Australia, playing different festivals, different events. But I always found that I was always happiest when I cooked.

[00:02:48] Khanh

When I was a DJ, I had a lot of free time because I was only playing on the weekends. So during the week, I would be hiking, searching for mushrooms or fishing or going to the market and it was always back to food.

[00:02:59] Khanh

I'm a feeder. I love to feed my friends. So I think while I was deejaying, I had a lot of dinner parties during the week. I had friends come over and I would try new dishes on them.

[00:03:08] Khanh

And that's kind of where my love for food really grew. I loved cooking since a child because that's my mum and I used to do in the kitchen. But as I grew older, I started making things for my friends and my family. And that's how MasterChef actually happened as well. A good friend of mine knew that I loved cooking, so she actually applied for me.

[00:03:29] Interviewer

And you didn't know about it or you knew about it?

[00:03:31] Interviewer

I didn't know until I got an email being like your application work is incomplete and we would require you to complete it. Obviously, she didn't she couldn't film herself on my behalf, so I had to complete my application. I filmed myself submitting some photos. And I was like, all right, well, it's already halfway there, I may as well jump in now.

[00:03:49] Interviewer

Oh that's very funny.

[00:03:52] interviewer

Khanh you were a contestant on MasterChef and won the hearts of so many people. Can you talk about your best and worst experiences on MasterChef? Feel free to include any little behind the scenes secrets.

[00:04:04] Khanh

I love this. Ah yeah. I actually loved MasterChef.

[00:04:09] Khanh

I loved my entire experience on MasterChef from best to worse. My best experience, I reckon, would have been the people that I met and how much I learned on the program in the competition.

[00:04:20] Khanh

My worst experience would be probably the first time I was on MasterChef season ten, 2018. I was away from my family a lot and communications with with family were quite low. We were only really speaking to our friends, our family twice a week for ten minutes. So that was really hard on me because I am quite social and I speak, I speak to my mom every second day and that kind of wasn't happening. We weren't having long conversations. I found that really difficult, but there was nothing else that I really disliked. I enjoyed the entire process. I enjoyed learning from new friends. I even enjoyed living in the contestant house in season 10. Because I got to learn from so many new people, there's so many things that different cultures and different experiences can teach you, and the MasterChef house that is like on steroids, like everyone is just helping each other while watching everyone cook the past season in the back to win season into 2020. We lived in service apartment, so I didn't get to

experience a lot of that, which is a shame. I know that a lot of the other contestants loved that we were in a service apartment, but I kind of liked living in a house where we could all teach each other. New things, as I thought behind the scenes secrets. There isn't much to share. Everything that happens on MasterChef is really real. The time limits are real. We get given briefs right before the challenge. It's not like we have hours to think about it. It's literally what we see on TV. There's probably a three-minute, four minute gap between us knowing the brief and beginning to cook that all they do is reset cameras and then you're off.

[00:05:55] Interviewer

So did the judges. Do they actually taste the food cold though I'm sure they do?

Khanh

Yeah, yeah. They taste their food cold. But what happens is during the cook and just towards the end of the cook, the judges actually taste the majority of our dishes, all of our dishes, really.

[00:06:11] Khanh

We leave the room for a clean down.

[00:06:14] Khanh

And during that process, the judges actually taste all of our prep, so they know exactly what our dishes are supposed to taste like. Hot. And then what we see on camera is them tasting it again.

[00:06:23] Interviewer

Oh right. Very interesting. Can you tell me what was the inspiration behind your five super sexy chapters? Heritage Secrets, the family we choose, A broken heart, Being Basic?

[00:06:37] Khanh

So it's funny. When I first brought the book to MacMillan Pan Macmillan, it was actually only A gay guy's guide to a broken heart. I was kind of going through a little broken break of my own, and that's the book I want to write right now. And I presented to them that chapter. And the more that we spoke about it, the more I thought, you know what, there's actually a lot more to this than that one chapter. So that's how the other chapters

kind of happened. I wanted to cook foods that I learned from my mum and my dad, and I wanted to cook food to share with my friends and also like my basics and like for new dates, like there were so many things that I wanted to show in a book so we couldn't really stick with that one chapter as the entire book. So we decided to have it as A gay guy's, guide to life, love food and just have that first little pitch as a chapter in the book.

[00:07:28] Interviewer

I bet you're glad that you decided that.

[00:07:31] Khanh

Yeah, I did, because I think I was in a different place when I first wrote that first chapter and I was like, this is the book. It's a breakup book, Like. And now, like, now, it's a celebration book.

[00:07:42] Khanh

We've got like recipes for all sorts of different kind of times in your life.

[00:07:47] Interviewer

Well, we would have missed out on some of the recipes had you just stuck to the one chapter.

Khanh

Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewer

Now, this is a tricky question. I'm curious, as a young boy going to school in Australia, what was the typical food in your lunchbox?

[00:08:02] Khanh

Ok, so the typical food I would have in my lunchbox was always chicken wings. Mum loved her chicken wings. So, we always had like some chicken wings with, like a soy sesame glaze on them with a little bit of rice.

[00:08:13] Khanh

I love I think this is why I love, like eating cold rice growing up. I had it in my lunchbox and it was never like hot because there was, I wasn't reheating in the microwave or anything like that. It was always in the fridge cold. And so, I would always have that, all there would be fried rice or there would be like clay pot beef, it was not a very typical lunchbox.

[00:08:31] Khanh

Even our snacks I would get like persimmons, guavas and like the fruit was a little bit different in well, and I remember I used to trade my food all the time for having sandwiches, Vegemite sandwiches, and I would say like a bag of chips and let your chips are not what I have.

[00:08:46] Khanh

I've got like shrimp, like chips and like they're delicious, but I want to try that, like.

[00:08:52] Khanh

So, there was a lot of trading happening in in primary school. As I got older during high school, I was actually really, I feel as though when you grow up, you don't want to be too different. So, I found myself making my own lunches because I didn't want to tell mum. No, I can't bring fried rice to school. The kids are going to make fun of me. So I was making my own lunches for high school. And I kind of really regret that now because I was a teenager listening to this, I would be like, no, embrace that. That is so cool.

[00:09:18] Khanh

Like, I like if I have kids and they're growing up, they will be getting the foods that I love, the kind of heritage-based foods Vietnamese, food for their lunches, because I think that's really special.

[00:09:28] Interviewer

It is special, but I guarantee you they'll still want to swap for a Vegemite sandwich

[00:09:36] Khanh

It won't stop.

Khanh

Yeah, no, I agree.

[00:09:41] Khanh

I reckon they would too, but I'm still going to make them eat it.

[00:09:44] Interviewer

That's right. That's right. I know your mother was a great inspiration to you. Tell me a little bit about her measuring techniques. My own mother still to this day, measures some dry ingredients in the palm of her hand. And my hand is completely different sized to hers.

[00:09:59] Khanh

That is, like that is such a mother thing to do to not like they don't hide their secret ingredients or measurements from you, but because they cook in a certain way, they don't know how to explain it. So sometimes when I ask mum for recipes, she'd be like, yeah, so the chicken, you just make a stock first. And I'm like, OK, cool, what's in the stock? She's like, you know, all the stock ingredients. I was like, can you like from beginning to end, what would I put in? Because, you know, you make like a colouring, like using the sugar and the oil is like, yep. And she was then like, your aromats go in to like what aromats? She would never give me precise anything, even with like the measurements, because, you know, it's all by taste. You just pour some fish sauce in it. I don't know how much water you put into your thing. It's going to be different. I was like, that's why you need to give me measurements.

[00:10:41] Khanh

But no, not none of that. She's like, taste it. And then even at the end, when the dishes done, she goes. Then you season, then I'm like, what are we seasoning with? You know, like your seasonings? And I was like, Yeah, OK. When you say seasoning, sometimes you say soy sauce. Sometimes you say fish sauce. Sometimes you say salt. Sometimes you salt, pepper and chili. What is she talking about? She Khanh, you know, that dish has soy sauce in it.

[00:11:01] Khanh

And I'm like, no, I don't know that. Like, I need you to tell me things like that.

[00:11:07] Interviewer

They are funny. And what happens when you end up cooking something that tastes better than hers?

[00:11:13] Khanh

Ah mum will never, never agree. She will be like, no, yours is great, but it's not the same. There was a dish that we did at our restaurant and when she tasted, she's like. This is Thit Kho, which is clay pot beef that we do no actually it was Ca Kho, which is Clay pot fish, and I used a different kind of fish.

[00:11:33] Khanh

I used I think it was a ling instead. No a red emperor instead of like river fish that they usually have in Vietnam. And she loved it, but she's like, oh, it's not the same. It's not like it's really good. But I say I'm like, oh my God, Mom, this is actually so bomb

[00:11:48] Khanh

She would never admit that

[00:11:53] Interviewer

Of course not. That's too funny. Can you explain why you say raw bean sprouts are worse than the devil? Is there anything else that you absolutely not eat?

[00:12:05] Khanh

This is something that I know is really jarring because I am Vietnamese and people would be very confused by the fact that I just hate raw bean shoots. I don't know what it is. It's in a lot of our salads, it's in a lot of pho and all our different broth dishes. But unless it's been blanched, I will not eat it. I do not enjoy it. Sometimes when it's in salads, I can deal with it because it's heavily drenched in dressing. So it kind of the acidity cooks it. But I find raw bean shoots have this taste that is kind of a little bit bitter, very grassy not like the type of grassy that I enjoy from like spinach and things like that. I find it's it's, I don't know, it's just a taste that I cannot deal with. As soon as it's blanched, I love it as soon as it's softened a bit and it's not a stark white anymore. I am obsessed with it. But if it's raw, don't give it to me.

[00:12:57] Khanh

When Mom makes me Pho or any of those brothy dishes at home, she knows to microwave my bean shoots before putting all the other ingredients on top because I won't eat it. But besides on that I'm so easy. Like I will eat anything. I will try anything once and I've probably maybe not try that. Probably not whale I won't eat a whale

[00:13:20] Khanh

Oh no, no not not my vibe.

[00:13:24] Khanh

It doesn't. That is not really ingredients that I am opposed to. Everything I think has a time and a place. And even though I hate raw bean shoots, A Banh mi chicken salad that has a sesame dressing with a little bit of chili on it. Needs the bean shoots.

[00:13:37] Khanh

It's a refresher once it's coated in those oils, I'm totally fine with it. Bean shoots and alfalfa. Don't put alfalfa on my sandwiches, please.

[00:13:48] Interviewer

No?, no?, They're so crunchy

[00:13:54] Khanh

I know that's a texture thing, but the taste itself, I'm not in love with

Interviewer

People will have to disagree with you. With that.

Khanh

I know

[00:14:00] Interviewer

You mentioned in your book that you used to be terrified, absolutely terrified of making desserts. Can you tell our listeners about your most memorable dessert fails?

[00:14:12] Khanh

Oh, yeah. Like all of them. All of them in the first half of MasterChef. I think my biggest failure on MasterChef was always a dessert.

[00:14:20] Khanh

And I think it was for Nigella Lawson. I did a pistachio ice cream with a strawberry and rose jelly and a crumb and some rose syrup or something on it

[00:14:32] Khanh

But I didn't know how to work with gelatin back then. I was like the desserts and pastry were very new to me. I could do the ice cream and I knew how to get flavour out of the ice cream. No problems. The actual jelly itself was soft set, which means I couldn't get into a sheet like I wanted it to cover the ice cream. So I served burnt crumb with a pistachio ice cream and under set jelly that was kind of just falling apart on the plate. Oh, and I couldn't get it out of the container. So as I was scooping it, it just kept breaking and I just had like little blobs of jelly. It was horrific and it was an elimination. I thought I was going home and Nigella was like, but he made a pistachio ice cream that is delicious, in an hour which is harder. And I was like, if I didn't have Nigella that day with my pistachio ice cream, I would have gone home. There would be no doubt. I would have been like, no, I would not be having this conversation with you, because I think the career would be completely different.

[00:15:25] Interviewer

Oh, come on now. Nigella rescued you.

[00:15:29] Khanh

Yeah, she did rescue me because it was very early in the competition. And I feel like I was really lucky. I'm doing MasterChef twice because it gave me an opportunity for the Australian people to kind of get to know me again and kind of see what I do. So, yeah, I think I'm very thankful for that one day that Nigella Lawson saved me.

[00:15:48] Interviewer

And you've got the book, so.

[00:15:51] Khanh

Yeah, thanks.

Interviewer

Did you did you dedicate it to Nigella?

[00:15:56] Khanh

No, I did not dedicate it to Nigella. I actually read the dedication to you. It's actually quite tongue in cheek. The dedication is to.

[00:16:01] Khanh

So it's to my mum Dzung, my late dad, Tam, and my sister Amy. I love you. To every foodie home cook and reader share these recipes and the love. And to all my ex boyfriends and lovers who are strangers now lol. I probs wrote about you in this book and changed your name. Sorry about that. P.S I'm winning.

[00:16:18] Interviewer

Oh that's wonderful. That's so funny. I know that. You are super passionate with Vietnamese cuisine. What is your second favourite cuisine and why?

[00:16:29] Khanh

Oh, that's a hard one. It would probably be Indian food

Interviewer

Indian!

Khanh

Yeah, I find it really difficult. I find it that I have to learn a lot when I'm trying to make different Indian dishes.

[00:16:43] Khanh

When you first look at Indian dishes, you think that they're quite similar, but it's all about that kind of knowledge and that experience with Indian food that makes a difference. So

the ingredients might always be similar, but the dishes, will taste completely different, it's about how you use the ingredients.

[00:16:59] Khanh

And I find that fascinating. Indian cuisine is also full of flavour, full of texture, really just really interesting to me and I want to learn more about it. So I would love that if I could.

[00:17:09] Khanh

Only one thing, though, for the rest of my life, it'd be Greek

[00:17:13] Interviewer

Can I ask you a question about your the title of your Greek salad, now that you mention that? Khanh when I read the title of that salad, I went. Mm hmm. Listeners, you'll have to borrow the book. And then if you know the Greek salad, you'll know what I'm talking about.

[00:17:32] Khanh

Ok, so my the Greek salad that you're talking about is a salad that I have a lot of. I eat it for lunch on most days. I go to a place called Pino's in Prahran Market, which has these beautiful, like the absolute beautiful, most beautiful, dried oregano, unlike a whole branch basically of oregano. And it just sits in my kitchen. It makes a mess because every time you walk past it like a thousand oregano leaves, which is full, but it's worth it because every single time I make any salad at home, there'll be a base of cucumbers, tomatoes, whatever I'm putting in it sometimes feta, sometimes not. Sometimes chicken, sometimes tuna, sometimes an egg, sometimes not. No matter what it is, the dressing will always have a little bit of olive oil, a little a squeeze of lemon and a whole lot of salt and pepper. And also this oregano

[00:18:24] Interviewer

That's why you warranted the word Greek to go into the title as well.

[00:18:28] Khanh

Yes, it's the it's the oregano. It's the oregano and sometimes that the tuna the feta but the oregano.

[00:18:35] Khanh

I loved it because I when I first was eating Greek salads, I could I was only eating the Australian kind of takeaway shop version of a Greek salad. I wasn't really eating a Greek salad. So when I was in Greece a couple of years ago and I found that they were very heavy handed on the oregano, it was like literally little buds of oregano in all my salads. And I was like, that's fascinating

[00:18:54] Interviewer

That the aroma from the oregano, is just amazing.

[00:18:59] Khanh

Yeah. And so that's what I have a lot of my salads. So I'm like, this is kind of Greek because this is something I learnt in Greece so it's my yes.

[00:19:10] Interviewer

It's just made me laugh. Kind of Greek. Kind of Greek. I thought I should have mentioned that in the interview. Well, yes, I've mentioned it now, didn't I?

[00:19:18] Khanh

Look, I'm not embarrassed about it because I feel as though to me it's not Greek in the traditional sense of a Greek salad. It's Greek because it takes me back to a moment. Yes. That I use like that I remember from being in Greece. So it's my kind of Greek salad.

[00:19:33] Interviewer

Yeah, that's right. That's right. Now, I'll let you off there Khanh I will let you off. Even then, my heritage, as you know, is Greek background. So I will let you off. Only just lightly though

[00:19:43] Khanh

Ok, thank you.

[00:19:46] Interviewer

I like your version of the best way to drink water a very special recipe indeed. Can you share with our listeners and tell them that it comes with a warning sign?

[00:19:57] Khanh

Yes, I get a lot of questions on my Instagram about different recipes, but sometimes people write things as a troll or a joke or whatever.

[00:20:09] Khanh

So I while I was writing this book, I asked for ideas. I asked people what they wanted to see from me recipe wise, and someone wrote, How do you drink water? And I was like, All right, this is supposed to be a joke, but I'll take it a little bit further. So the best way I think you should drink water is with a little bit of vodka.

[00:20:29] Interviewer

How much vodka?

Khanh

A little bit like one shot of vodka maybe two have with also some ice, a dash, a squeeze of lime.

[00:20:39] Khanh

And the warning is that if you continually drink that, it may result on you dancing on tables and singing to Ariana Grande, which I've done a lot of in my years.

[00:20:51] Interviewer

Your number one favourite cookbook, of course, is your very own, but which is your second favourite cookbook and why

Khanh

Oh this is so hard OK that I've actually got two any cookbook by The Women's Weekly.

[00:21:09] Khanh

Is that very random.

Interviewer

No, it's actually it's not random because oh, now I'm going to confess. I've got so many Women's Weekly cookbooks. It's not funny. Yeah, it's not random.

[00:21:21] Khanh

It's not because they're foolproof. Their simple, easy to understand, and it's a great base for any recipe that you want to do where you kind of learn it makes you understand how things work, and then you can kind of run off and do what you want on them. But that's my base. Yes. Yeah.

[00:21:40] Interviewer

I love it. Goodness, that's that's really funny. That's really funny. And then we sit there and we we say, well, that doesn't really look like I had you know, I had a go at you about your Greek salad. But then when they do something that's Vietnamese you're probably thinking, no, it needs something else.

[00:21:56] Khanh

Yeah, but but you know what? I think that a lot of people really love that all the Women's Weekly cookbooks, but they are afraid to admit it.

[00:22:05] Khanh

But I'm like because we all used it on MasterChef at the beginning, we were all that's what like we get our base recipes from and then we start to explore what we're into and we move on from that. But we all use them. So I'm not embarrassed to say that.

[00:22:18] Interviewer

No, I don't know what answer you expecting from me, but I totally agree with you.

[00:22:24] Khanh

I feel, though, sometimes when I speak to people, when they talk about things like that, they expect me to say something like Bray or like Ottolenghi, like it's like but I'm like the cookbook that I utilize the most would actually be a Women's Weekly one.

[00:22:40] Khanh

Well, and my second one is not a cookbook, but I use it a lot and I am obsessed with it. It's more of a way to make my own recipes. And it's the Flavour Thesaurus by Niki Segnit. I think it is it is the best book that you will ever find. It talks about flavour pairings. It has a full kind of glossary at the back where it's like pistachios go really well

with chocolate. Goes really well with this, but it goes through like really weird combinations that you don't expect as well. And I think it's fascinating.

[00:23:13] Interviewer

Wow. I'll have to look out for that one. Yeah.

[00:23:18] Interviewer

All right, just before we go, Khanh, can you talk a little about the famous T-shirts that you wore on MasterChef with the slogan You are loved. What it means, the inspiration behind them and where they can be purchased?

[00:23:32] Khanh

Definitely. So when I came back on the back to win season of MasterChef in 2020, I knew that we weren't really allowed to wear any sponsored items of clothing with big branding on it. But I what I loved was I wanted to share a little bit of a positive message to everyone watching at home. I know what a giant platform MasterChef is. It's absolutely huge. And I just wanted a little message that just kind of reminded people at home that there is a little bit of love for them in the world. So that's where the You Are love slogan came from.

[00:24:04] Khanh

After a couple of weeks, the Australian public really paid attention to it.

[00:24:09] Khanh

I got a lot of messages about it, so I got those shirts made by an Australian company. And now after that, after getting all those messages, I decided I was going to actually make them for sale. And a portion of those sales actually goes to one of my favourite charities, Minus18, which help LGBTQIA+ youth. I use a lot of their services when I was young and trying to find myself trying to find new friends in the community and just create connections. So that was a charity that I'm obsessed with. So we started with T-shirts and then there were face masks that were made. And I've just launched track pants and hoodies, with also kind of like a percentage of every single item sale going to Minus18.

[00:24:53] Interviewer

That's wonderful. And I believe you've raised over 10,000 thousand dollars so far.

[00:24:58] Khanh

I've actually raised over 45,000 thousand dollars.

Interviewer

Oh, I beg your pardon? That's amazing. Amazing.

[00:25:04] Khanh

Yeah. The T-shirts alone first round raised ten thousand dollars, but I found that all the products really sold out. The Australian public are absolutely amazing and they just loved getting behind it. And what I loved is I found that when I was wearing the you are loved T-shirt's in real life, as people walk past me, they were just kind of smile. I think it's just a tiny little message that makes people smile. And that's what I am obsessed with.

[00:25:26] Khanh

So you can buy the all of those items from <https://youarelovedworld.com/>

[00:25:31] Interviewer

Wonderful. That's great. That's great. Oh, it's amazing. Amount of money you've raised. Wonderful.

Khanh

Thank you.

Interviewer

Thank you, Khanh, for your time and for a wonderful chat. We wish you all the best with your new book, A Gay Guy's Guide to Life, Love Food and with all future publications. Kahn's book is available at any of our Inner West libraries. Ready for you to borrow Log on to our catalogue and place a reservation at any time. If you would like to

purchase Khanh's book, please visit [Booktopia](#) online or call your favourite bookstore.
Bye for now!