

# Dinky toys, DJing and throwing pottery: How top chefs stay creative

JACQUI TAFFEL September 10 2019



Pastry chef Anna Polyviou is planning to do a cooking demo and DJ at the same time. *Photo: Edwina Pickles*

Of the many ingredients that go into making a great chef, one of the most crucial is creativity. The best technique, team and dining room in the world are nothing without a deep and fertile imagination leading the way, and the ability to deliver that vision onto the plate day after day.

This creative streak often extends far beyond the kitchen. We talk to four chefs who have pursued different forms of artistic expression, and how this feeds back into their food.

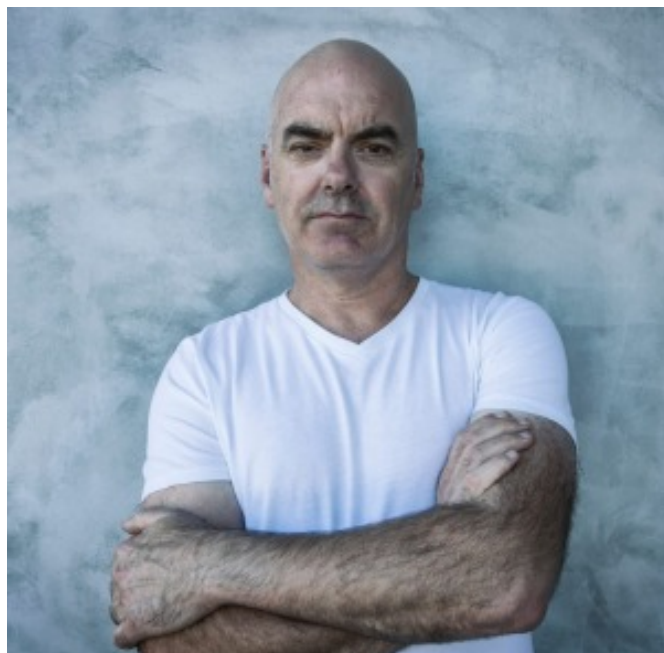
## Mark Best

Winding down his acclaimed Surry Hills restaurant Marque [three years ago](#), after 17 years of hats and hard graft, was one of the hardest things Mark Best has done. One positive outcome of extricating himself from the pressures of fine dining has been more time for photography, a skill he learnt at school way before he started cooking for a living at 25.

At Murray Bridge High in South Australia, students made their own pin-hole cameras from ice-cream containers, then got a Pentax and developed their own photos

in the dark room.

Best has never stopped taking photos, but [post-Marque](#) has taken it to another level. His website galleries show his talent for capturing people in the moment and art in the details of everyday life, from a line of young conscripts sitting on a pavement in Vietnam, to a father and son sound asleep on sunbeds in Koh Samui, to portraits of his own son Ethan, wife Valerie and friends like Rene Redzepi and [Massimo Bottura](#).



Chef Mark Best's long-time love of photography was able to flourish after he wound down his acclaimed Sydney restaurant. *Photo: Louie Douvis*



A line of young conscripts in Vietnam (detail). *Photo: Mark Best*

*I go into things very deeply and passionately.*

Ben Shewry

Best owns several cameras, including a Canon SLR, but mostly he carries an iPhone. "I'll just see something where the composition immediately appeals and snap it, it's

mostly spontaneous."

His portraits, as likely to be unknown faces as famous foodies, are never about pleasing the subject. "It's more who I think they are, when I see an image and say that's it, I've captured them, but it might not match their perception of themselves. That's a very interesting area for me."

He believes creativity can be taught, the same way he taught his kitchen staff at Marque to think deeply beyond the superficial, and doesn't see a distinction between his creative impulses as a photographer and as a chef. "Technically the mediums are different but it's the same dialogue and narrative, the same decisions have to be made, you just have to have an idea and back yourself to get to a certain point."

Best used to play guitar but gave it up when he took to the pans. "I cooked all this time, and now I've given that up photography has been able to bloom. Even though it seems to people like it's come out of nowhere, it's always been there."

Unlike guitar, he would never give it up. "I enjoy it too much; I need to do it."

## **Ben Shewry**

Since arriving at [Attica](#) in 2005, Ben Shewry has been showered with countless awards and accolades, including Australia's best restaurant, yet one of his life highlights remains organising a primary school disco in his small New Zealand home town of Whareorino when he was 12. "The whole community came down, it was like a dream come true," he says. "There were only seven students at my school but I was definitely the coolest one that day."

Shewry still does the occasional live DJ gig but he has channelled this joy and enthusiasm into becoming an avid collector, which he considers a creative outlet. Original vinyl records are one passion – he owns 500-600 and he also collects skateboards and [furniture by Australian design legends Grant and Mary Featherston](#).

His biggest obsession since his mid-20s has been antique toys, fostered by growing up with the Fun Ho! toy factory in Inglewood, where he went to high school. He has "hundreds and hundreds" of collectable pieces, as well as Matchbox cars and Dinky aeroplanes. "They're beautiful, you can't buy things like that any more."



The appeal of collecting is partly the thrill of the hunt. Flipping covers in a record shop in Denmark last year, he uncovered an obscure EP he had been chasing for years by New Zealand band the Great Unwashed, worth about \$500. He paid \$50.

Ultimately though, it's all about the people he has met, from fellow fans at record fairs to the ex-Mongrel Mob gang member and Fun Ho! toy enthusiast who became a good friend.

The creative influences from collecting also help keep Attica firing and evolving. Shewry recently had his favourite Featherston chair, a classic 1961 design, [specially manufactured for the dining room](#). "There's so much history in that chair, it's the last chair I'll ever buy," he says.



Ben Shewry and his beloved Featherston chair and toys. *Photo: Simon Schluter*

They are a personal gift to his diners, as is the music they hear. "I gave up a long time ago trying to please everybody so I just play the things I like."

Music has inspired his whole approach to life. "What I learnt from independent record labels like Dischord was that you could do anything you wanted. Just don't make any excuses, get on with the work at hand and make a little bit of money go a really long way."

His cultural interests outside cooking also act as a circuit-breaker. "I go into things very deeply and passionately, so I need to balance that intensity by doing other things."

At times he melds these passions. Attica has hosted a tribute to iconic punk band Radio Birdman and a conversation with Mary Featherston for Heide Museum of Modern Art, and for last year's MAD Symposium in Denmark, Rene Redzepi's international food gathering, Shewry DJ-ed at the closing party. "It was a huge honour; there were 100 people there, really into it."

If you ever see Shewry on the decks, don't bother asking for requests. "It's just a fun thing to do, I never charge for it but that means I get to play what I want," he says. "I have a 10-for-one style – I play 10 songs you don't know then one you do know. That way you keep people hooked."



Music and street art are passions of Polyviou's. *Photo: Edwina Pickles*

## **Anna Polyviou**

"I find cooking demonstrations really boring," Anna Polyviou complained over drinks with friends, as she was about to present one for the first time six years ago. Her mate Brooke, a chef and part-time DJ, had just bought new record decks and offered her services. A demo with a DJ? Sounds like fun.

So Polyviou's debut, how to make cheesecake push pops, kicked off with *Push It* by '80s hip-hop stars Salt-n-Pepa, cranked way up.

"People went nuts. I went, that's it, from now on we have to have music or a DJ or something entertaining."

Polyviou and her mohawk have since become instantly recognisable, thanks to her appearances on *MasterChef* with her terrifyingly technical desserts, and on other food shows. In her day job as executive pastry chef at Sydney's Shangri-La Hotel, Polyviou also pioneered her Sweet Street concept, a cross between a dance party

and a food festival high on sugar, and has had creative collaborations with artists, dancers and filmmakers.

Her love of music and street art came from her Melbourne childhood.

"I used to buy magazines on graffiti and I used to draw and dance a lot." School was a struggle – she learnt Greek from her migrant parents before English – but like her mum she loved doing creative projects. She was a huge fan of empowered '80s and '90s acts like Salt-n-Pepa, Queen Latifah and TLC, and is still inspired by the memory of seeing them perform live. "I would not stop staring at the stage, I was totally engaged. That's what I think about now, how do I engage my audience?"

Music also sets the tone in her kitchen at the Shangri-La. She installed the sound system but her staff get to choose the playlist – Mandarin pop tunes are big. "They sing along, which I don't mind," Polyviou says, "It helps make them productive."

Now she's planning something new; taking mixing lessons from her friend Brooke. "I cook her diner and she teaches me how to DJ."

It's harder than it looks. Trying to master different RPMs (revolutions per minute), Polyviou finds it easier to mix '80s tracks than more contemporary tunes ("The beats are all over the place.")

Her ultimate aim is to present a cooking demonstration and DJ at the same time at the Cake Bake and Sweets show in Melbourne in November, where she first pushed it with her cheesecake pops. Spinning discs and making sweets simultaneously, really?

"You have to come and see it to believe it, that's all I have to say."





Julian Hills makes the plates at his Melbourne fine diner Restaurant Navi. *Photos: Eddie Jim (above); Ed Sloane (below)*

## Julian Hills

Julian Hills is often asked about the plates at [Restaurant Navi](#), the 25-seat fine-diner he opened less than a year ago in Melbourne's Yarraville that has been a hot ticket ever since.

"I made that," he says to diners who marvel at the stunning ceramics their food arrives on. He also made all the napkin rings and table vases.

Inspired by the dedication to craft he admired in Japan, Hills laboured at the pottery wheel for six months to make his tableware before opening. Eating at Navi is "not just coming out for dinner" he says. "I've thought about everything. People are basically in my lounge room, a fancy lounge room, experiencing me and the craft."

Hills' high school art teacher was a potter and he became fascinated by the throwing process. "If I try something and I can't do it, I try harder and then I get quite obsessed," he says. "I was a little bit ADD so finding something I could focus on for a few hours was magical."

While studying for a Bachelor of Fine Arts at RMIT, he started cooking at a gastropub on the side – and loved it. His parents (mum an English teacher and author, dad

a musician) were shocked when he broke the news: he wanted to be a chef, not an artist.

His six-year one-hatted stint at [Paringa Estate restaurant](#) proved he meant business, but he didn't touch clay during that time.

Starting work on Navi's ceramics after such a long break was scary as he sat back down at his wheel, a gift from his high school pottery teacher. "An hour later I had eight plates looking exactly the way I'd imagined them. I was like, 'Oh, this is great, I miss this!'"

Known for his ever-changing 12-course menu – when he takes something off, it never comes back – Hills' artistic grounding is a key influence.

"I always see a dish in my head and then work backwards on how the textures and flavours come together," he says. "Don't get me wrong; flavour and texture are of utmost importance, but the visual side is just as important."

His ceramic art is an integral part of that vision, and his staff at Navi try very, very hard not to break or chip anything. Hills has learnt to control his anguish when they do. "Because I know they feel worse."

## **Melting pots for creative food types**

It seems more and more people in the food industry are seeking creative spaces to fire their passions.

Walking into [Example House](#), tucked at the back of Potts Point, there's already a buzz in the air before its even officially open.

After housing a car mechanic's business for 40 years, then several restaurants, the towering, softly-lit sandstone and brick walls now contain a co-working experiment





connecting the hospitality and creative industries.

Rebecca Gibbs and Andy El-Bayeh met 10 years ago while working in public relations for Sydney hospitality group Merivale. They kept Merivale as an account when they left to open their own agency Example, and gathered many more, rapidly growing from two to 16 people.

Example House came from their own experiences of co-working spaces. "We thought it would be really inspiring, that we would meet different people," says Gibbs. "But we found a lot of the industries using the spaces were more IT or finance-focused."

The new space is also inspired by Merivale's brainstorming sessions that gathered everyone from chefs, designers, stylists and bar managers to marketing. "We really wanted to foster that here, that sense of community, learning and bouncing ideas off each other."

As well as shared desk space, there is a kitchen, a bar, boardrooms and meeting rooms. The aim is to host small businesses, freelancers and single-venue restaurants and bars, those who can't afford to hire an agency or an office but can benefit from being around others from different disciplines.

"Even if it's having a chat with our creative designer in the kitchen making a cup of coffee in the morning, that's when ideas are sparked," Gibbs says.

In Melbourne, Michael Bascetta co-founded **Worksmith** in 2017, providing co-working specifically for food, beverage and hospitality people "to connect, work and grow together".

"The industry has always been under-serviced in the areas of education, networking and overall business support," he says. Collingwood's Worksmith hit its mark, expanding to a second space in the Melbourne CBD this year.

"We see people working together on different projects, using each other's products, helping out at different events, or even just lending a hand wherever needed," says Bascetta. But it's the less tangible results he finds most interesting: "Friendships, conversation and the willingness to lean into innovation rather than away from it."

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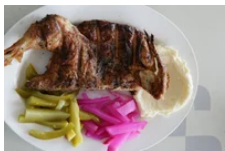
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