



Use your noodle

Cookbook author Tracey Lister shares the benefits of food with **DEBRA BELA**

Do you prefer rice or noodles?

Be careful how you answer – we're not talking about food here. A diet of noodles in a country like Vietnam will land you in hot water at home.

Australian chef-turned-author Tracey Lister and her husband, Andreas Pohl, have been asked the question many times in Vietnam. It's a running joke they expose in their new travel cookbook, *KOTO*.

"The everyday staple, rice, refers to the wife, whereas the fancier noodles stand for a mistress," they write.

"I don't mind noodle soup occasionally."

Lister has returned to Australia this week to promote the new Vietnamese cookbook and her work with street kids in the Hanoi-based cooking school KOTO, to which the book is dedicated.

"There are about 20,000 kids on the streets in Hanoi, but they're not the same as street kids in Australia," Lister says.

"Often they are children who are pulled out of school because the family could no longer afford it, and they are sent to Hanoi to find work on the streets (and) send money back to their families."

Lister has spent the past eight years working with KOTO founder Jimmy Pham, turning street kids into chefs as part of the Know One Teach One (KOTO) philosophy.

"One of our first students we found selling postcards out the front of the UN Building and Australian Embassy in Hanoi," Lister says.

"She graduated and went to work in Switzerland and has just got a scholarship to study at the Victorian TAFE."

For the past four years, Lister has brought graduates to Australia to raise funds and promote KOTO internationally.

Tonight, Vietnamese students Le Thi Xam and Le Van Trieu will talk about their experiences at a public event at Malt Cafe in Beaumaris.

The KOTO training program has grown from a sandwich shop employing 17 students to a 120-seat eatery supporting a two-year Certificate II course in hospitality, with 100 students learning how to become chefs while studying

RAPID FIRE

Favourite book:

A Fraction of the Whole by Steve Toltz.

Reading now:

The Fifth Woman by Kurt Wallander.

Favourite authors:

Patrick Suskind, Ian Rankin and Beatrix Potter.

Favourite cookery book:

The Cook's Companion by Stephanie Alexander.

Book that inspired you to write:

The Lonely Planet series.

First section you go to in a book store:

Cookery, then crime.

English – the language of the kitchen – and participating in a life skills program.

Students are accommodated in houses rented by KOTO and receive an allowance so they can continue to send money to their families.

As such, the school has a high retention rate.

The KOTO students were also part of the cookbook, working with photographer Michael Fountoulakis.

Lister and Pohl, who have a 3½-year-old daughter, Franka, have moved between Vietnam and Australia for eight years, but in April this year decided to call Hanoi home.

Lister is now setting up her own cooking school, teaching Vietnamese cooking to tourists and western cooking to locals.

"There is so much to food – it's a great way to interact with people," she says.

"It's very tactile, producing something people are putting into their body – an expression of caring and loving. Sharing that is very special."

But Lister says Australians are losing the social benefits of eating.

"We don't sit down in social or family groups to eat – a huge percentage don't sit down with the family at the end of the day to share a meal," she says.

"In Vietnam, no matter how busy they are, they always will share a meal."

■ *KOTO: A culinary journey through Vietnam* (Hardie Grant, \$45) is out now.