Should MasterChef have asked a Muslim to cook pork?

Yes, contestant Samira El Khafir agreed to cook pork, but that is beside the point.

Samantha Balaton-Chrimes

Many Australians would have watched Muslim MasterChef contestant Samira get kicked off the show on Wednesday night for cooking the worst pork hot dog. To be fair, putting it that way distorts the decision — it was her briochette that undid her. But in my mind there were bigger questions raised than whether or not her briochette was a disaster. Should MasterChef have asked a Muslim contestant to cook pork?

In my view, the answer is no. Pork, ham and bacon are well known to be haram, or prohibited under Islamic custom. How one of Australia’s most popular television shows makes a call between tolerance and accommodation of the customs of religious minorities is something that demands interrogation.

To allow Samira El Khafir on the show, complete with hijab, is an act of toleration that we wouldn’t have seen only a few years ago. It makes no qualitative difference to the show, or to our lives, so we allow it. Great. However, it was made clear on Wednesday night that we have not come much further than that in the way we interact with minorities.

What we should have seen was accommodation of Samira’s religious customs. It should have been a meat other than pork. Accommodation goes further than toleration because it requires us to make some change to the way we do things, rather than to simply invite others in as long as they do things the way they’re done around here. For MasterChef to avoid dishes containing pork, ham or bacon so long as Samira or any other Muslim or Jewish contestants are part of the game does not strike me as a particularly major sacrifice.

I do not doubt that it will make some qualitative difference to the show, and certain dishes or cuisines that many would find delicious may be off the menu. There is a cost, in that sense, of this kind of accommodation. But it is not a cost that fundamentally threatens the fabric of our society, or which offends our sense of justice. It is when the costs of accommodation fall in this category that the decisions are difficult. Lamb instead of pork sausage hardly does.

Some will object to this argument on the grounds that it is impossible to draw a clear line where the costs or sacrifices meet the criteria I suggested above, of threatening the fabric of our society, or offending our sense of justice. These are contested concepts. What counts as enough consensus to warrant subjecting minorities, religious or other kinds, to participation in practices they object to? Certainly that line is far from clear.

There are practices in some minority cultures that should be neither accommodated nor tolerated, for example extreme forms of gender discrimination. There are also many practices that fall into a grey area where it is not clear whether we should disallow, tolerate or accommodate them. In this category fall practices such as polygamy. These grey area issues are confronting and difficult for us (and by this I mean all of us, including the minorities concerned) to work through. There are no clear answers.

This is exactly why we must be accommodating when and where we can, when the costs are not high, and the questions not that difficult. If we cannot even manage that, then our identity as a “multicultural” nation is under threat. Practices like those on MasterChef suggest that Australia is a community that only welcomes new communities, or allows existing minorities to express themselves and live their lifestyles as and when it suits the majority. We have a long way to go before we are ready to tackle the really difficult issues, as a community in which religious, cultural, ethnic or racial minorities are an equal part of the discussion, rather than guests who must play by home rules.

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