



**First course**  
**Tracey Lister and Andreas Pohl**

# A recipe for a good cause

**Fiona Donnelly**

JAMIE Oliver's Fifteen Foundation was just a twinkle in the celebrity chef's eye when a Vietnamese-Australian called Jimmy Pham was setting up Hanoi's KOTO restaurant to teach homeless Vietnamese children how to become chefs.

KOTO has never achieved the fame of Fifteen but in its own unassuming way has succeeded in helping literally hundreds to find their way off the street.

Melbourne chef Tracey Lister, described by Pham as his "professional guardian angel", has published *KOTO: A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam*, based on her experiences living in Vietnam and working with the charity.

Part recipe book, part travelogue, part memoir, the beautifully photographed work is a testament to Lister and husband/co-author Andreas Pohl's love for their adopted country, its people and cuisine.

Royalties from sales will be ploughed back to help yet more disadvantaged Vietnamese children.

Lister originally moved to Hanoi in 2000 when Pohl was offered a job on an AusAid project. Used to working long hours in restaurants she felt at a loose end and just two days after arriving heard about Pham and tracked him down.

At that stage KOTO was running an eight-seater cafe, with students serving milkshakes and sandwiches.

"He (Pham) talked of his plans to open a bigger restaurant and teach more kids," Lister says.

"Five months later we opened an 80-seater and enrolled 17 kids into the program, including girls for the first time."

KOTO, an acronym for "know one,

teach one" now has a 120-seat eatery next door to the Temple of Literature, as well as a separate training centre.

At any time, about 100 disadvantaged or street kids will be going through the course learning to be front-of-house staff or training as chefs.

"Working with these kids is a breeze," Lister says. "They are so motivated to learn. You don't get many opportunities in Vietnam, so when you do, you really work at it."

But she is quick to point out the teaching hasn't all been one-way. Lister's job at KOTO was to cover "Western training" and the health and safety side of things. Vietnamese chefs taught students Vietnamese cooking.

"All my training and experience has been very European-based. I learned from the Vietnamese chefs who we recruited but the bulk has come from the graduate trainees," she says. "They know I love food so they're always inviting me to their house for dinner or saying, 'Hey, come to this great place' which I've usually never heard of and which only opens at 5am. They're always introducing me to new dishes."

One dish Lister could probably have done without sampling was dog, traditionally eaten in the second half of each month by Vietnamese men to bring good luck and increase virility.

"I'd managed to avoid it until about a month ago," she says. "We were invited to the first anniversary of the death of the father of one of the graduates, which was a great honour. They'd spent the whole day preparing dog meat seven different ways, so I ate some."

Lister says the dogs are purposely bred for eating, so it's not quite like devouring a treasured family pet but admits it's still confronting.

"The meat was quite sour and chewy," she says.

Other ingredients also have been challenging.

"We were at a guest house and I was getting on well with the cook helping her to prepare sticky rice when a woman arrived with a string of fruit bats meant for dinner. I'm a chef so I just rolled up my sleeves and got on with it. I had a bit of an audience, though, because no one had ever seen a western woman eat fruit bat before."

And the verdict? "Quite gamey but not a lot of meat. I imagine rat would taste much the same but I haven't tasted it."

The 70 or so recipes in her new book are all accessible and feature ingredients you can buy in Australia. She says the cuisine lends itself well to the Aussie lifestyle.

"Vietnamese food is aromatic with lots of herbs. It's very fresh and the recipes are easy to put together. A lot of dishes are cooked on charcoal burners out the front of homes or shops, so it's similar to barbecue."

For those unacquainted she suggests sampling pho or spring rolls.

As well as continuing to work at KOTO she is in the throes of setting up her own cooking school [www.hanoicookingcentre.com](http://www.hanoicookingcentre.com) to teach Vietnamese cooking to foreigners and Western cooking to Vietnamese.

**KOTO: A Culinary Journey Through Vietnam, by Tracey Lister and Andreas Pohl, Hardie Grant, \$45.**



**WORTHY work ... KOTO author Tracey Lister and co-author Andreas Pohl.**