

Ayen teaches African men to cook

What is it about the kitchen that makes it the scene of gender battles across cultures? CAROLINE REGIDOR tackles the gender battles of the kitchen as she teaches African men the essentials of cooking.

In western culture the most revered hospitality professionals are typically male chefs. Most restaurants that score coveted chef's hats in the annual Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide predominantly employ, and are managed by, male chefs. Internationally, Tetsuya, Jamie Oliver and the Iron Chefs on SBS' popular television show are male. In western society, the hierarchy between the professional and the amateur – and the prestige and pay packet that go with it – is clearly demonstrated in kitchens.

Fiction using cooking as the central metaphor is replete with illustrations of the gender divide. In Laura Esquivel's novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, the protagonist's journey is told through her recipes. Mexican culinary delights incite passions as extreme as love and murder amongst the characters. However in this case, with the domestic kitchen as the main dramatic setting, the strongest characters in the novel are female, with male characters in support roles.

Ayen's Cooking School, a project of Supporting Survivors of Torture and Trauma in South Australia, similarly conveys the importance of the kitchen as a space where gender roles are articulated and negotiated.

On the most basic level, an SBS documentary, first shown last February 2007, looks at how Sudanese men are learning to survive in their new surroundings. Like fish out of water, they cannot cope with having to keep house in their new environment. But it's more than that. The focal points of the dramatic tension in this warm and funny documentary are the skirmishes between Ayen, a Sudanese female who starts a cooking school for men, her male trainees and the elder women in the Sudanese community.

More than a teacher, Ayen is a community leader and feminist. Her aim is to address the practical and urgent needs of her trainees. Some of the men, who had never cooked in their lives, were starving despite having a fridge full of food!

There are roadblocks to the deceptively simple task of cooking. A young male Sudanese refugee,

Alier, puts it very plainly, "cooking, cleaning, washing the dishes, it's the duty of your sister". Some Sudanese women – particularly those from older generations – agree with Alier.

The female elders of Sudan do not allow their men into the kitchen. The traditional division of roles and responsibilities between the genders is the broad reason. Just how much of a taboo is it for men to cook? Some Sudanese believe that men should not cook because their penises might burn on the cooking fires. Clearly Ayen faces an uphill battle in the face of such entrenched customs!

But she turns the tables when she reaches the dramatic climax of her training program – cooking for female elders. Tougher critics could not be found; they have strong doubts about the men's newly acquired skills and also have high standards.

Of course the story has a happy ending, but Ayen takes us on an unforgettable journey along the way.

More than two million people have perished as a result of decades of fighting in southern Sudan. More than four million have fled their homes. The portraits painted in this documentary bring to life the impact of what is happening on the other side of the world.

The men who learn to cook are husbands, brothers and sons, each of whom has lost someone. They are coping with the challenges of being displaced in Australia, where life is as different as can be. Food is just the beginning. As the men learn the basic cooking skills to survive, they discover other rewards that come with playing the role of nurturer.

In the end, perhaps men of all cultures can relate to this – they might see that cooking for a woman from time to time is a guaranteed way to impress her. It's important that everyone should be able to cook a few simple meals, not just for survival, but also to impress the ladies, including, of course, wives, mums and aunts. ■

