

Maggie Beer set out to revamp the food served in aged care homes and the results are in

By [Anastasia Safioleas](#) for Maggie Beer's Big Mission

Aged Care

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With many in aged care malnourished or at risk of malnutrition, Maggie Beer has made it her mission to improve the food served to residents in care. *(Megan Lewis/Artemis Media)*

Ask Thelma what she loves best about the aged care residence she calls home, and she'll say it's the made-to-order toasties.

"You order a toastie and they give you a toasted ham and cheese. It's the best thing they've done," says the 89-year-old.

The new addition to the menu is one of several changes introduced as part of a recent social experiment at a Meath Care residence in Perth, Western Australia.

89-year-old Marion, a fellow resident and friend with 16 grandchildren, agrees.

"We love them," she says.

Marion and Thelma are seen in ABC iView's Maggie Beer's Big Mission, as the food icon and her team of experts work to improve the quality and food experiences of people living in aged care.



Maggie Beer joins aged care residents for breakfast. (Megan Lewis/Artemis Media)

Over four months, the meals and dining experience at the Meath Care home were transformed — dining rooms received a makeover, menus were reinvigorated, and a kitchen garden was planted.

"People in aged care homes today are a resilient generation who have lived through world wars and the [Great] Depression," Maggie recently wrote for the ABC.

"I believe they deserve to enjoy fresh food full of flavour and goodness."

From toasties to breakfast buffets

Mark Fung has worked as a carer for Meath Care for nine years.

While it's emotionally draining work, especially when a resident passes away, Mark describes it as a job that is great for his mental health.

"I don't know what it does, but I just enjoy it so much."

According to Mark, Maggie's work has made the dishes on the menu more colourful and fragrant.

But he sees the introduction of a breakfast buffet as having the biggest impact.

"It's really nice looking and that's important for people's appetite as they generally don't have an appetite when they get to this age, so that really encourages people to eat," he says.

"Having a choice is important. It empowers people ..."



Aged care home resident Merle, who features in Maggie Beer's Big Mission, likes to have a choice in what she eats. (Megan Lewis/Artemis Media)

Merle, a fellow resident, shares this sentiment.

"When you have your choice taken away from you when you move into an institution like this, it's a bit galling," she says.

For Marion, the benefits of being able to serve yourself are two-fold.

"You can get exactly what you want, as much or as little as you want, and then there's less wastage," she says.

For Maggie, Merle and Marion's experience was a compelling reason for introducing the buffet breakfast and she hopes they "remember the joy of choice".

Another popular change, according to Mark, has been the redesign of the dining rooms – splitting the space into two, to create a peaceful dining experience.

"It's less frenetic," he says.

Marion, meanwhile, enjoys the addition of tablecloths and napkins on every table.

"I love the colours and we've changed the tablecloths – blue and burgundy," she says.



Aged care chef Sasanka Peiris worked with Maggie to reinvigorate the home's menu and kitchen. (*Megan Lewis/Artemis Media*)

Revamped food experience

Executive chef Sasanka Peiris, who goes by Sas, left his home in Sri Lanka for Australia almost 17 years ago and has worked in aged care kitchens ever since.

"At the end of the day, when I see the residents happy, it's a great pleasure," he says.

"I'm always happy to tell the world where I work and what I do because I have so much pride in being an aged care chef. We create beautiful meals."

The addition of an extra kitchen hand, to help with the cooking, has had the biggest impact for Sas, who throughout the series was seen struggling to keep on top of training staff, running a kitchen and admin across two sites.



Maggie with chef Sas and Maggie Beer Foundation chef Amanda cooking a nutritious meal for residents.
(Artemis Media)

"I've also got a lot more administration help. For ten years, when I would go on holidays, I would still have to do the ordering.

"It's good to have someone come and help me do that."

The essential role played by skilled kitchen staff is not lost on Maggie.

"Supporting the kitchen and dining teams to learn new techniques and skills in what is perhaps the most important, worthwhile, and complex hospitality role in Australia," she says.

"Especially because it is also the only one for which there is no accredited training anywhere in Australia."

Sas says spending time with someone as knowledgeable as Maggie has been valuable.

"I'm only 38, Maggie is almost 80 years old – I can learn from her. And I believe you can learn every single day,"

he says.

Did Maggie Beer's experiment work?

The 2019 Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety revealed some [confronting truths](#) about Australia's aged care system.

The final report, released in 2021, found substandard food to be common, with the quality of aged care menus coming down to what the facility pays per resident, which in some cases is as little as \$7 per person.



Associate Professor Jade Cartwright from the University of Tasmania discusses her findings with Maggie. (Megan Lewis/Artemis Media)

In a submission to the royal commission, Maggie Beer described how during her work with her foundation, she found meals in aged care homes were often prepared with little regard to presentation, aroma or nutrition.

"You cannot make good food with bad ingredients," she said.

The royal commission also highlighted studies that revealed as many as 68 per cent of people receiving residential aged care were malnourished or at risk of malnutrition.

These findings were reflected in baseline health data collected from Meath Care by the School of Health Sciences at the University of Tasmania, at the beginning of Maggie's experiment.

Led by Associate Professor Jane Cartwright, the results revealed that 78 per cent of residents evaluated at the home were malnourished or at risk of malnutrition, with high rates of depression and cognitive impairment also identified.

These figures partly reflect the vulnerability of these residents, many in the final stages of life and living with complex health conditions.

Following Maggie's experiment, Professor Cartwright and her team found that 57 per cent of residents evaluated gained or maintained weight.

Changes to the menu and a more inviting dining space positively impacted mood, appetite, social and occupational engagement in meals, and increased mealtime satisfaction.

The final report stated that, over time, these changes will have what the researchers call "health-promoting effects" for residents and the home.

As Marion says of the new changes: "You never leave the table hungry."

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