

FROM LEFT: Poh Ling Yeow, Jono Bennett, Matt Phipps and Sarah Rich, with Gingy the dog.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY YIANNI ASTRODAKIS. THESE IMAGES HAVE BEEN RETOUCHED.

Poh Ling Yeow

My tangled *MasterChef* romance

Poh Ling Yeow's manager and ex-husband is now with her best friend, the TV cook married a man she met on *MasterChef* and all four own a cafe together. Poh and Co tell **Susan Horsburgh** how they make it work.

The four friends pose for *The Weekly*'s photographer in Poh's Adelaide backyard, with Irish terrier Gingy flopping his front paws on the table and Scotties Tim and Rhino fetching balls around the humans' feet. Feeling awkward, Poh's manager, Matt Phipps, can't work out where to put his limbs and wonders aloud how to hold his teacup. "Far out!" shoots Poh, like she's teasing a pesky little brother. "How much direction do you need?"

After seeing them together, it comes as no surprise to learn that Poh and Matt were married for nine years – or that it didn't last. Both feisty and opinionated, the two have gone on to pick more complementary, easy-going partners, but an affectionate friendship remains, and neither of them is willing to discard it. "Why do we have to," asks Matt, "simply because tradition says we should hate each other's guts?"

Not having children may have simplified the situation, but the pair still seems more evolved than most. "We were such great mates – that's what made it so hard for us to break up in the first place," explains Poh. "We are each other's closest confidantes."

Their bond is so strong, in fact, that it has survived Matt falling in love with Poh's best friend, Sarah Rich, and the two couples going into business together, opening Jamface cafe at the Adelaide Central Market two years ago. Outsiders are puzzled by the set-up, but it's apparently no big deal to any of them. And as much as everyone loves the idea of a communal love nest, there is nothing salacious about it. Poh says she and Matt are "so blokey with each other", they're more like siblings.

Poh Ling Yeow, who found single-name fame in 2009 in *MasterChef*'s first season, often describes her life as "chaos" and today it's no exaggeration. "Welcome to the disaster that is my house," she says, as she opens her bright blue door, beaming that signature oval-shaped smile. The place is part art gallery and part op shop, with secondhand ornaments everywhere, a cage of budgies on magazine stacks in the living room and a giant ceramic pot of goldfish near the kitchen. In the front yard, half the beehive has defected with the queen and an apiarist has been called in to fix the swarming crisis. Inside, Poh is whipping up eggs in between tidying benchtops and wiping away cobwebs – all while radiating that endearing, scatty energy you see on screen.

The 43-year-old TV cook has been pulling 18-hour days of late, working at Jamface and finishing off her third cookbook, *Poh Bakes 100 Greats,* in between trips to Thailand, Sweden and Tasmania in the past three »



LEFT: "We're not like gushy girlfriends that divulge," says Poh of Sarah. BELOW: Sarah and Matt have been together for 10 years.



months. "She does a lot and her time management is very bad, so it can be hard," says her husband, Jono Bennett, who renovated their backyard on the SBS series *Poh & Co* last year. When the 35-year-old actor-DJ-carpenter is winding down for the day, night owl Poh is often just hitting her stride, only turning in at five in the morning.

The pair met in 2009 during the making of *MasterChef* when Jono was a production runner, driving the contestants to and from the studio. "She's like sunshine," he says. "From the get-go, she was someone I was willing to change for. I really had to grow up – she demanded a lot more of me, so I gave it to her." When they met, Jono was 27 and Poh thought he was gorgeous, but the contestants weren't allowed to fraternise with the crew, so it wasn't until the wrap party that they exchanged numbers. "I didn't take him very seriously because I thought he had quite a flirtatious personality," says Poh, "and I didn't trust that at all." After a couple of months of long-distance dating, though, Jono moved to Adelaide to give the relationship a go. "Jono's a very simple, in-or-out person," says Poh, who married him in 2014.

Jono may have been immature, but Poh apparently needed some work, too. "She was very tough," he says, "and she needed someone who could soften her out." Jono was the man for the job – a perfect foil for Poh. "He's really kind and patient, and he puts up with a lot of my neuroses," she says. "He's an extrovert and I'm mostly introverted, despite what people think – so he's always very up and I'm usually dark and broody." Still, Jono initially struggled with Matt's presence in Poh's life. "It was hard at first, but it was my own personal issues of confidence in myself and jealousy, which had no reason to be there," he says. "There's a lot of history [between Poh and Matt], so it's not something that can be taken away. It's not something that should be."

> "People feel like she's their friend right off the bat."

Poh and Matt were both Mormons when they met in 1990. He had grown up in the faith and Poh, who'd migrated from Malaysia as a nine-year-old, converted with her family at the age of 16. Then known as Sharon, Poh was a gregarious "free thinker", recalls Matt, 48, "not something you expect to find in a church environment". They started dating when Poh was 21, just back from a nine-month overseas trip that had opened her eyes to the world. After growing up in a strict Chinese-Malaysian family, she had become friends with a transgender woman, for example, while living in Toronto. She couldn't slide back into religious life in Australia.

Matt, an aspiring film writer and director, was having his own crisis of faith, so they sought solace in each other. They married when Poh was 24, outside the church – a declaration of independence. The marriage was volatile from the start, but the pair also encouraged each other's creative dreams. Poh, a design graduate-turned-make-up artist, began painting full-time in 2002 and Matt went into filmmaking. She was the inspiration for *Poh*, a short film that won him an award, and he convinced her to drop "Sharon" for her birth name. Still, the constant fighting wore them down, and family pressure only added to the stress. "The next step was to have children and we were so going in the other direction," says Poh. "There was just so much pain between us that it was kind of a relief to let it go and let that turn into something really beautiful – a lifelong friendship." For the last three years of the marriage, they slept in separate rooms until they split in 2007. »

Matt and Sarah got together "really soon after", says Poh, but she doesn't want to "get into the nitty-gritty" of timing or how she found out. "It was uncomfortable for a little bit, but that was literally for a matter of weeks," she says, "because it was just so resolved by the time we split up."

There was apparently no Big Reveal of the new relationship. "Poh was aware of it unfolding," says Matt. "It's not a case of partner theft. She'd moved on before she met Jono and before things solidified with Sarah and myself." For her part, 40-year-old Sarah says her best friend never baulked at her dating her ex-husband – "She'd moved on, she was with another guy". And did Sarah ever feel weird? "No, not really." Clearly, if there ever was any ickiness, they've all been big enough to get over it. In fact, it was Sarah who sent Poh a text suggesting she audition for a new show called *MasterChef*.

Poh and Sarah have been friends since the first day of their university design course, back in 1996, and have bonded over their mutual love of art and baking. Even before *MasterChef*, they used to peek into vacant shops and dream of opening a patisserie together, and last year they produced a children's book, *Sweet Petite*, with Poh writing and Sarah illustrating.

"It's funny, we're not like gushy girlfriends that divulge … there's a lot of unspoken stuff," says Poh. "She's kind of this really quiet influence in my life. She's very sort of wise, doesn't really stick her nose into things, and has this sensitive approach to life that I really love."

Plenty of *MasterChef* contestants have come and gone, but few have leveraged their 15 minutes quite like Poh, who has racked up three seasons of *Poh's Kitchen* on ABC TV and two of *Poh & Co* on SBS, three cookbooks and her own cafe and catering business. Sarah reckons it all boils down to being genuine. "She's just being herself," says Sarah, "and people feel like she's their friend right off the bat."

Poh says she fights hard to maintain that authenticity, refusing a stylist for today's shoot, for example, and insisting they wear their own clothes. She may be a celebrated cook, but she's not above eating Spam and rice – a favourite childhood dish – or even the occasional McDonald's. "I don't pretend I'm anything I'm not," she says. "I'm just an everyday cook – I've just got really good because I do it so much."

Now that her baking cookbook is done, she plans to focus more on painting and Jamface, as well as TV projects she and Matt have in the pipeline. She accepts that children probably won't enter the picture. "I think my window has gone, but if it has, there are a lot of things in life that can give you joy," she says. "I know I would love it and would be good at it if I had a child – and I might still have one, a miracle might happen – but I don't want to go down the IVF path. I'm just being really chilled about it."

> "I would love it if I had a child – and I might still have one."

Not that "chilled" is her natural state. She may be on abnormally healthy terms with her ex-husband, but the self-confessed obsessive isn't always so Zen. "It doesn't take much for me to start ruminating," says Poh. "Like if I sold a tart to someone that wasn't the right shape – just weird little things like that I'll obsess about."

So how does she define success? "Being happy when you're still," she says, laughing. "So I haven't quite attained that yet." **AWW**

For an exclusive extract from *Poh Bakes 100 Greats*, turn to page 154.



Poh's husband Jono struggled at first with her ex in their lives, but now they're friends.