

A belief that food is her “fate” led Alice Zaslavsky from teaching to a culinary career. The colourful cook chats with *Steve Dow*.

taking the cake

On Alice Zaslavsky's new five-nights-a-week cooking show there is a large working kitchen, decorated in her choices of “soothing” lime, “happy” lemon and spot-colour pink.

The 39-year-old *MasterChef* alumna and *ABC News Breakfast* regular chose these colours because she wants people to feel joyful when they tune in to *A Bite to Eat with Alice*. Each weeknight at 6pm they'll be able to watch her make a meal with a different guest, be it a comedian, athlete or musician.

Tacked to the refrigerator here on set in Studio 32 at the ABC's Melbourne Southbank complex is a picture of a chocolate cake with sprinkles. It's drawn by Hazel, the five-year-old daughter Zaslavsky shares with her husband, Nick Fallu, a former osteopath whose job these days is being a dad while also helping to manage the Zaslavsky cooking juggernaut.

Hazel's fridge drawing was hard won. “She didn't want to give me a piece of art,” confides Zaslavsky as we wait in the green room for rock star Ella Hooper to come from make-up to film the final sequences of the new show.

“Nick and Hazel came in with me one morning on *News Breakfast* and saw this set. I said, ‘Hazel, look at this fridge; I need you to draw some pictures for it.’ She said, ‘No!’ Then I realised and said, ‘I still have to go to work, even if you don't give me the drawings.’”

How was Hazel convinced to draw? “I stopped talking about it – and that's my advice: people say to me, ‘How does she eat so widely? How do I get my kids to eat more interesting foods?’ But the more you push it, the more kids push against it.

“I put the paper in front of her, she forgot why she was being oppositional in the first place, and then she created that chocolate sprinkle cake drawing.” Zaslavsky was teaching her daughter to cook before Hazel could even peer over a kitchen bench, a process that allowed for gradual exploration. “I would sit her on the bench and she would pick herbs, do little odd jobs, even taste things as we go.”

The bespectacled Zaslavsky is ebullient, effervescent, erudite, but she hasn't always been on firm ground. She was the same age as her daughter when she arrived in Sydney in 1991 with her parents, Arkady and Frada, both professors in computer science, and her brother Stan, eight years her senior. Little Alice spoke Georgian and Russian but no English.

That year, Georgia declared independence from the then Soviet Union, but the chaotic collapse of the communist system led to civil war and the Soviet Army crushing a pro-independence demonstration in the capital, Tbilisi, in 1989. “The Cold War was ending and the Soviet Union was releasing all the Jews; like, we were finally allowed to leave,” says Zaslavsky.

Her parents had been fearful for their futures if they stayed because of their Jewish surnames. Her mother, who specialised in applied mathematics, had been told explicitly: “This is as far as your career will go.”

Arkady and Frada spared their daughter these details for years. “They experienced some very dangerous times, with guns pulled on them,” she tells me.

Her parents applied for visas to resettle in Israel, America, Germany

and Australia. “In the last minutes, Australia opened its doors, they got skilled migrant visas and left. But they only had enough money to get to Singapore: it was friends of friends, based in Adelaide, who lent us the money to get here.

“My dad packed his precious books, records, stamps and coins; my mum packed her pots and pans and sheets. Within months after we flew out, the air strip we left from was bombed.”

The family moved into an apartment above a shop in Bondi and Zaslavsky went to a nearby school, dressed in donated clothes from a Jewish charity. On hard-rubbish night, she'd prowled Bondi's more affluent streets, fishing unwanted toys from the bins.

Meanwhile, Arkady and Frada's attempt to get a bank loan to open a Georgian restaurant was unsuccessful.

In 1992, her grandparents and cousins came to Australia as refugees, at first flying to Moscow in an army plane. Her grandfather had been a communist, a party man, and a foreman in a metallurgy plant. “He thought: ‘That's it. They're going to kill us. We was afraid this was the betrayal, and they'd never see Australia.’”

Eventually, her father gained an academic role at Monash University and the family resettled in Melbourne.

In 2014, Zaslavsky realised what a rose-tinted view she had of her early childhood when she read a novel, *The Eighth Life* by Georgian-German novelist Nino Haratsisvili. It includes a passage about a massacre that took place at a demonstration on April 9, 1989, in the same street Zaslavsky attended kindergarten.

“It was violent, people died,” she says. “I read the book and said to Mum, ‘I know this place. Were we there?’ And she said, ‘Oh yeah, but it happened at night.’ As a child, I could remember soldiers in the street, and that was like a normal thing; I absolutely didn't put the pieces together.”

Back on the set, Ella Hooper arrives with long, purple rock-star fingernails, proffering a bunch of coriander like a bouquet. The latter is to be added to Zaslavsky's coriander tabouli with salted kale, which they cook together. “I get so hungry when I see kale,” says Hooper. “I must be low in iron.”

Zaslavsky comments that some people think of kale as a “hipster vegetable”, so it attracts unwarranted hate. But just as Hooper strips the kale, part of this show's mission is about stripping away food myths. Hooper confides that she's self-conscious about her chopping skills but Zaslavsky reassures her by noting that television's usual demonstrations of perfect culinary skills set viewers up to fail.

A Bite to Eat with Alice is also about accessibility. In the first segment, filmed earlier, Zaslavsky had showed how a broth base could be made from the juices at the bottom of a store-bought rotisserie chicken's plastic carrier, known colloquially as a “bachelor's handbag”.

It is quickly becoming apparent that this is an interview show in disguise as Hooper works on her allotted kitchen tasks and talks about life on the road, her family, friends, dreams, songwriting and her admiration for musician Bonnie Raitt. After the episode wraps, Zaslavsky tells me she's been influenced



by reading writer and poet Maxine Beneba Clarke's biographical portraits, absorbing Clarke's eye for detail. Zaslavsky is also an ardent chatterer with strangers on planes, talking for the whole flight if she can.

Her earth-mother approach was honed through gratitude for both her new life in Australia and her first career, as a teacher of English and Classics at Haileybury College in Melbourne. “The thing I loved about teaching is that it's like performing,” she says. “I'd got a captive audience who can't leave for 40 minutes, and I could spark them up with ideas.

“I would often bring food into class. I had the smartest, brightest kids in Classics, six to eight students, and

I'd bring in tzatziki and we would talk about Ancient Greece. Or we might go to an Italian restaurant and talk about Rome. The food was just an easy way to hook them in.”

Zaslavsky believes “food is my dream and my fate”, noting that her great-grandfather Moisei cooked borscht for the Bolshevik army rather than fight. Her fondest early memories are of foraging and picking fruit with her grandfather Boris, an avid gardener, and watching her grandmother Zina do the cooking.

This genetic fate made Zaslavsky a natural for *MasterChef*, landing on our screens in season four, in 2012. The judges loved her quattro formaggi pizza and twice-cooked

tongue, but eliminated her later in the competition for overcooking lamb.

“Competing on *MasterChef* is like school in that you don't get along with everybody,” she says. “It was a tough time. Moments like that overcooked lamb were really challenging, but you must go to the edge to find your centre. They were gruelling days.”

Despite the judges' verdict a cooking star was born, and more TV, some radio hosting and cookbooks followed – including her latest, *Salad for Days*, out on October 1. She also realised an ideal: back in her *MasterChef* days, Zaslavsky had spoken of her dream to drive around in a bus called Ms Z's Lunch Box, teaching kids about healthy food.

Then an older woman said, “You realise the bus is just a vehicle?” and Zaslavsky understood that it didn't have to be a physical bus. In 2016, she created the digital toolkit Phenomenon to connect kids with food, culture and the environment. Today, it is used in thousands of classrooms.

And her hopes for this new TV show? “Impact is the word. If I can effect positive change in the way Australians are cooking, eating, thinking about what's in their fridge or what's in their garden, or how they feed their families – I know that's lofty, but I'm kind of halfway there.” •

A Bite to Eat with Alice premieres on ABC TV on October 28.