

A U S T R A L I A
NEW FOOD
FROM THE
NEW WORLD



Gilly Smith

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A compendium of recipes from the finest chefs working within the innovative Australian style.

Something extraordinary is happening in the restaurants of Australia. East meets West in their kitchens to produce freshly delicious, distinctly flavoured menus that are changing the way we think about food. The Wizards of Oz, some of the finest chefs in global cuisine, are cooking with a unique attitude; combining the best of the world's culinary influences including Italian, Greek, Thai, Chinese and Vietnamese.

Their bold eclectic approach to food has filtered into top London restaurants. Yet only Australia – with its unique mix of European immigrants, traditional Asian communities, backpacking youth and unrivalled food produce – could have created Mediterrasian food. Within this definitive collection of recipes, from some of the world's most exciting chefs, lies an evocative look at the birth of a food culture.

Take part in a culinary revolution with these daring, mouth-watering recipes.

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Once Upon A Time In Australia

A GREAT BIG MELTING POT

Australia has come of age, at once recognizing the integrity of its parts, while finally coming to terms with its whole. A remarkable achievement, and perhaps only possible because so much of it has to do with eating. Or perhaps because its people are among the most open in the world. Without a heritage of their own to cling to (okay, so the first settlers came with a British food culture, but who from the next generation would insist on stew when risotto was on the menu?), they were more than happy to see what else was cooking, once those who were cooking finally opened their kitchen doors. Where in the world would you find such a people so open to change? Imagine trying to introduce a new food into Italy or Spain. The Mediterranean diet hasn't changed in the last 2,000 years. Try changing classic French cuisine, and you'll get a frying pan thrown at you.

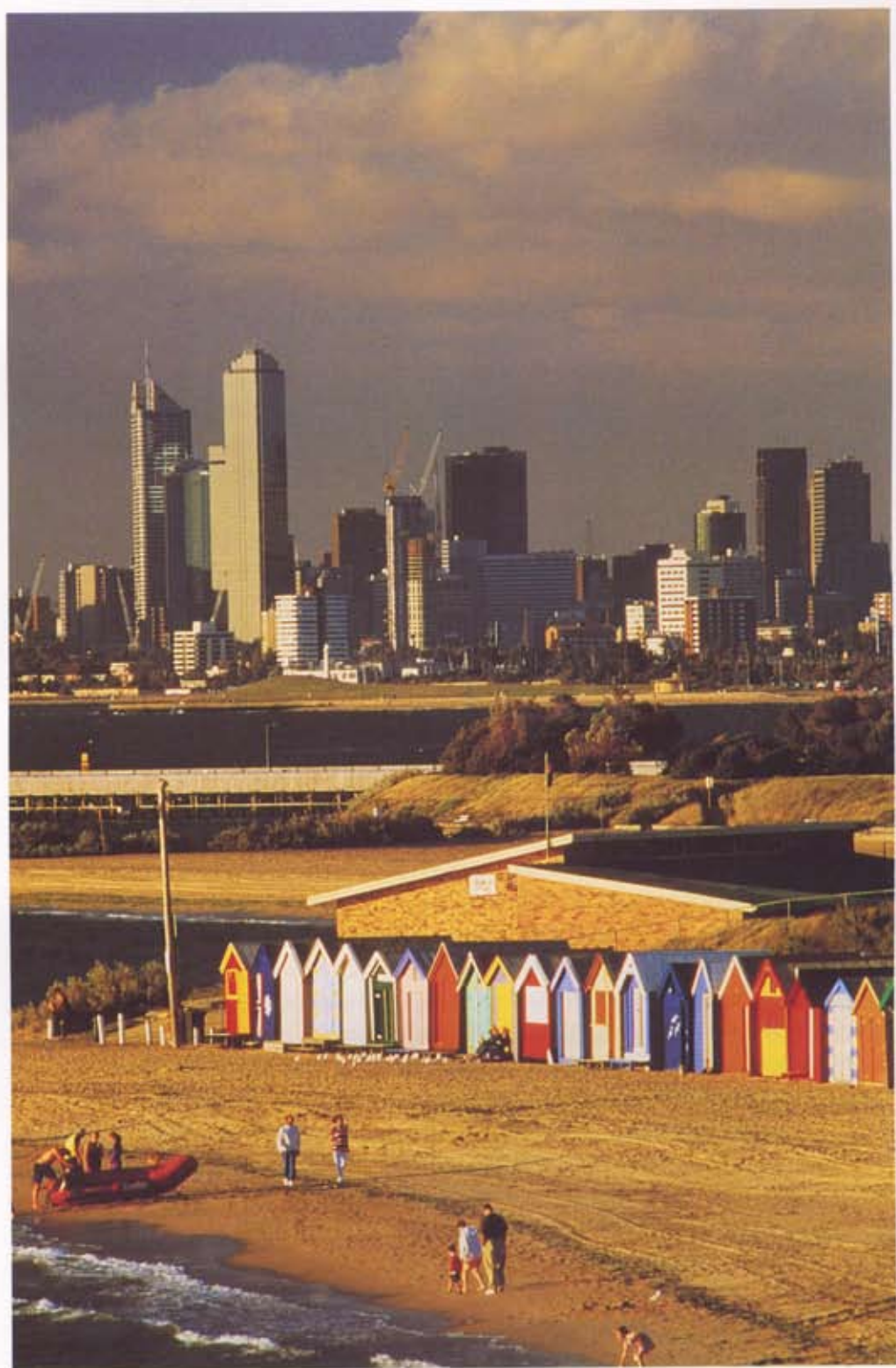
The chefs behind the integration of Mediterranean, Asian and 'Australian' culinary principles understand better than most how it all happened. Ask any of

them why their food is so good and they will tell you that they've watched it grow roots. They understand their food and they understand their country. David Thompson of Darley Street Thai thinks that they didn't have much to lose: 'We didn't have to discard any preconceptions about food while accepting it into our own culture. The only thing that we were happy to throw out was the white food our mothers were cooking for us. When Australia started to change after the war, and began to drift away from its Anglo-Celtic heritage, it wasn't sufficiently entrenched to impose its culture on the newcomers. Assimilation of the new migrants was encouraged of course, but unlike in England or any other established culture, newcomers did not have a culture thrust upon them.'

Neil Perry, Sydney's most prominent personality chef, gives full credit to his compatriots for the rise of Australian cuisine: 'I think we believe in ourselves here and we develop our own flavours. I don't think we're afraid of developing our own ideas. Australian people don't rip ideas off, they allow themselves to be inspired.' Bill Marchetti, German-born Italian migrant who now owns The Latin, one of the two oldest surviving Italian restaurants in Melbourne, agrees: 'Australians are particularly open; without a culture of their own, they're a bit like a blank page. It's great fun putting things on the menu and they taste it and say "Wow, what was that?" You do that in Italy and they'll lynch you. If I had a restaurant in Milan, I'd be cooking Milanese food. If I used a Sicilian style for some dishes, they'd say "Hey, what do you think you're doing?"'

But it took something more than an open-minded punter to turn the tide so radically from the lamb stews of the fifties to the chilli king prawns of the nineties. Something else was happening in the kitchens of Australia. Traditionally, apprentices had gone into cooking because it was a skill to learn, like mechanics perhaps. It didn't tend to attract graduates or professional people at a turning point in their lives. Says David Thompson: 'We were at the cusp of change; people were going into it because they liked to cook rather than merely as a trade.' The new kudos attached to being a cook means that it now attracts the particularly creative and the ambitious. He points out that both Chris Manfield and Steve Manfredi trained as teachers, while Stephanie Alexander and Gay Bilson were both librarians. Peter Conistis, the film graduate, Beh Kim Un, the chemist, Philip Searle, the artist, Janni Kyritsis, the electrician — they all made a conscious decision to cook for pleasure, rather than being forced into it simply because it was a job. 'So you have three factors making up this new movement,' David Thompson, the history graduate, summed up for me, 'volition, ingredients and also the growth of the punter. The punter is becoming very literate when it comes to eating out.'

Martin Webb adds another factor, the role of the critic. 'The freedom you're given here is amazing as long as you can control it,' he tells me. 'London food can be quite boring comparatively — everyone does tarte tatin. I had a lot of problems with food critics in London wondering why we were doing mussels with pesto.' But there are



still some gripes. 'I'm having problems here with journalists wondering why we haven't got tablecloths or sideplates on the tables in the Brasserie at George's, and I say, "Look you're lucky we're not asking you to keep hold of your knife and fork like they do in Paris." We don't want to be fine dining here — I want people to enjoy the food. . . As soon as you're into silver service, you've missed the point.'

What goes on in Australian kitchens and restaurants also has a great deal to do with where they are. One thing that an outsider forgets about Australia is the enormous distance between cities. It's as far from Sydney to Melbourne as it is from London to Paris, New York to Washington, and the cities are just as different. The food culture too is completely separate.

Melburnian-born Sydneysiders, Jill Dupleix and Terry Durack are the queen and king of the Australian restaurant scene, commanding the critic pages in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Epicure*, the *Melbourne Age's* food-obsessed weekly supplement. Jill eats in, writing features about food and creating recipes, while Terry eats out and criticizes. Both began their foodie careers in Melbourne and are in a unique position to comment on the tale of the two cities. 'There's a huge difference between the European attitude towards food and eating in Melbourne and the fast lane of Sydney,' Terry told me over dinner at Eleni's. 'People tend to eat at home more in Melbourne, while you're unlikely to find much of a kitchen in the apartments of Paddington.'

'Take the recipes I do for the papers,' added Jill. 'If I do a fig cake, Melburnians will know how it should taste because they'll have cooked it five times already; Sydneysiders will know how it should taste because they'll have had Lou Kathreptis.' Chris Manfield, chef/owner at Paramount, and partner Margie Harris opened a store next door to their restaurant in Potts Point in central Sydney in an attempt to offer Sydneys' foodies take-home Paramount food. It didn't last. 'The problem was that Chris and Margie understood that Sydneysiders don't want to cook, but want to eat great food that they can afford,' said Terry. 'The one thing they forgot was that they wouldn't have an oven to heat it up.'

From Potts Point to Paddington, in what some would call the heart of the city, the streets are littered with cafés. Not quite Brunswick Street, with its Melburnian-Italian authenticity, and more like New York on a Sunday afternoon, Paddington is where Sydney has its tea. Well, maybe a short black or a latté. British convention is long forgotten in the buzz of Sydney's Indian summer. La Mensa, a smart Italian eatery on Paddington's Oxford Street, is serving Tuscan bean soup and pastas to a late-rising crowd as we stroll in for a coffee. Meanwhile in Melbourne, Brunswick Street is also entertaining. Its late risers might have come in for lunch rather than tea, but probably because they couldn't wait for the food. Smart and sassy Sydney may be, but Melbourne is where you want to be if your hangover needs some Italian loving.

However it's in the markets where you'll find the real food, and this is where the real difference between Sydney and Melbourne lies. Sydney has its fabulous

seafood market, complete with seafood cookery school. But where else would you get a foodie tour, other than in Melbourne's astonishing array of markets? At the Queen Victoria, Melbourne's oldest, and on over seven hectares of land, its largest outdoor market, a two-hour 'Foodies' Dream Tour' includes tastings from kangaroo to Aussie olives. A foodie kit contains details of seasonal produce, menus and a family dinner suggestion including shopping list. There are even more specialized tours: Cameron Russell offers the 'Fungi Finder's Tour' during the wetter months, for which a cool \$85 allows you to spend the day foraging for mushrooms in the pine forests just outside the city. A gourmet picnic of roasted quail, as well as Victorian cheeses and wines, is thrown in for good measure.

There's even a Melbourne market designed for the seriously rich — or the food fan who's got more saliva than sense. At Prahan Market in the smartest part of town, you can watch Japanese chefs prepare sushi sold in lunch boxes and buy the best game and reef fish in town. Plans for the future include live cooking demonstrations with celebrity chefs. It wouldn't happen in Soho.

Five kilometers outside Melbourne is Footscray. Italians, Greeks, Turks and Vietnamese, the people who made Melbourne's food world-famous, sell amaranth, water spinach, chrysanthemum leaves, banana leaves, chives in bud, Australian olives, Victorian walnuts, fresh Vietnamese mint, and all for next to nothing. For anyone interested in some serious Mediterrasian experimentation, Footscray is the bargain basement of your dreams. And the thing about all these markets that we haven't quite caught onto yet in the UK is that food shopping makes you hungry. Snack in Asian style on Cantonese dim sum, Turkish kebab and Ethiopian bread.

In March every year, the Melbourne markets overflow with visitors as they open their stalls to the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. This year the Queen Victoria market transformed itself into a hawkers centre, drawing more than 9,000 people over its three-night binge. Recreating the smells and sounds of the Asian markets, the *tok tok mee* (or wonton noodles) were heralded with the traditional two knocks on a wooden block. Indian musicians wandered the streets, fortune tellers told their tales, and lion dances added to the atmosphere. Revellers tucked into Thai herbal beef soup with rice noodles, green chicken curry with green bananas, Peking duck and bean curd rolls, and a host of unforgettable but undiscovered Asian delights: *Chinta Ria* — aubergine rolls that are crispy on the outside and creamy inside; Shanghainese 'pot-stickers', a kind of dumpling that is poached, then fried and served with red vinegar dip; flaky roti with curry and Thai *tab tim krob*, minutely diced water chestnuts thinly sheathed in translucent cooked tapioca flour and floating happily on a sea of coconut milk, sweetened with palm sugar and chilled with crushed ice. To a Melburnian, these are the wonders of the world.

But it wasn't always this way. If Australia sounds like the Emerald City, remember that the Yellow Brick Road (and what lay at the end of it) was never quite what it seemed. . .