

Manu's French Bistro

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Extract

Introduction

The restaurant business is in my blood, and I grew up cooking and eating the classic bistro fare that French cuisine is renowned for all over the world, such as vichyssoise, goat's cheese salad, coq au vin and duck confit. My father was a chef who ran his own bistro in Saint-Nazaire, France. The restaurant served simple food, such as salads, pates and terrines, and was always filled with workers from the town's shipping industry. After a brief stint as a circus performer in my early teens (seriously!), I realised that circus life wasn't for me. So, every night after school, from the age of 15, I worked at my dad's restaurant, serving customers and cleaning up after they had gone home.

Eventually I moved behind the scenes and into the kitchen, where I specialised in preparing the entrees, a job that I loved. These were all cold dishes, prepared in advance and stored in the fridge, then plated up at the last moment. As the kitchen was only small, the menu was quite limited. Even so, with just Dad and me in the kitchen, we still managed to serve an average of 200 customers every day for lunch. Dad also ran the hotel attached to the restaurant, so I soon took over behind the restaurant burners at night and didn't get to bed until after midnight. It was a busy life, but it gave me a taste for cooking.

From the moment I set foot in a restaurant kitchen, I knew this was what I wanted to do. Filled with enthusiasm for my new profession, I returned to my home town of Nantes, where I began my two-year apprenticeship at a restaurant called Rôtisserie du Palais. It was the hardest job I have ever had! The head chef was a bit scary, and I had to juggle my work as the only apprentice in a very busy kitchen with studying the theory of classic cuisine at the French equivalent of TAFE. The experience in my father's bistro stood me in good stead, as I specialised in cold entrees when I started. The life of a chef isn't glamorous, and one of my tasks was to clean all the fish for the restaurant (and I was only allowed one apron each week!) - it was horrendous. However, many of my friends had also decided to become chefs and their apprenticeships were equally challenging, so I figured it wasn't so bad. The second year I worked there, the head chef and I decided to work our way through the French master chef Escoffier's complete works. Not only was this an excellent grounding in the basic techniques and dishes of my

homeland's cuisine, but it was also an amazing experience that I still treasure, as it laid the foundations for what I do today.

With my apprenticeship behind me, the adventurer in me led me to London, where I landed without knowing a single word of English. I lucked into a job in the kitchen of the institution that was the Café Royal. Not only was it said to be Oscar Wilde's favourite watering hole, but Winston Churchill famously waited there to find out his political fate. (Sadly, it became a victim of the GFC in 2008, when it closed its doors for the last time after 143 years.) Compared to small bistro kitchens in France, it was a revelation to be part of a kitchen brigade of over 30 chefs. Somehow, I again started off making cold entrees – which may be why there are so many recipes for these in this book!

After working in various London restaurants over the next five years, I joined the acclaimed seafood restaurant Livebait, initially in Waterloo and then in Covent Garden. Each day we would order the finest fish from our suppliers, then devise a menu of five entrees and five mains to make the most of what was available, and bake our own bread in the tiny kitchen. I thrived on the challenge of creating a fresh menu every day, eventually becoming head chef. I relished the freedom and creativity involved in running such a small but perfectly formed place, and was thrilled when Livebait was nominated for best seafood restaurant in the UK in 1998.

Once again, the urge to travel struck, so in 1999 I set off for Australia, to try my luck here and follow my dream of one day owning my own restaurant. The rest, as they say, is history. After spending some time in Melbourne, I came to Sydney to visit a friend. Taking my CV with me on my first trip to Bondi Beach, I got a call back from Hugo's in Bondi. I was asked to run Hugo's Lounge in Kings Cross when it originally opened, and that's how I ended up meeting Pete Evans, my mate and co-host on *My Kitchen Rules*.

After stints in restaurant kitchens around town, including six years at Bilson's (which was awarded three chef's hats by the *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* for three years running while I was head chef), I finally had the opportunity to open my very own French bistro, L'étoile, in Sydney's Paddington. This is where I get to serve the kind of bistro food that I love from my formative years in France, and it is what inspired the idea for the collection of recipes I share here. This book is a tribute to my favourite classic bistro dishes, such as Twice-baked Cheese Souffles (see page 23), Confit Pork Belly with Apple Puree (see page 130) and Raspberry Souffles (see page 161), as well as those that I have taken inspiration from and then played with over the years, giving them my own little twist, such as Chilled Tomato Consomme with Prawn Salad (see page 18), Tuna Rossini (see page 84) and Chocolate Creme Brulee (see page 164). I love taking everything I have learnt as a chef over the years and injecting it with my own personality and tastes. I hope that you will love to cook and eat these dishes as much as I do.