

# MICHAEL COOK'S PENINSULA

as told to Tim Bracher

Michael Cook is an unassumingly passionate salesman for the Mornington Peninsula.

As the owner-operator of Salix Restaurant at Willow Creek Vineyard, he's also in a better position than most people to sell the region's many virtues. Salix is a 'shopwindow' for the best the Peninsula has to offer: local produce, quality wine, the beautiful rolling countryside of Merricks North, and all within a stone's throw of Westernport's lonely beaches.

Michael grew up in Mordialloc, endured endless hours of train travel to attend Xavier College, then entered the world of hospitality through a 4 year course in Catering and Hotel Management at William Angliss. After stints at some of Melbourne's best hotels, at Palm Cove and the Sheraton Noosa in Queensland, he arrived on the Peninsula in 1996 when he joined the staff of Max Paganoni's restaurant at Red Hill Estate.

A partnership with Max in 1998 to establish Mornington's 'Estasi' Restaurant was the bridge to him taking-up the lease of the newly expanded dining facility at Peter Harris's Willow Creek Vineyard.

Six years of renowned quality and service at Salix has been again recognised this year with another Chef's Hat in The Age Good Food Awards.

## **You were among the first wave of winery restaurants on the Peninsula?**

Max's at Red Hill Estate was the local pioneer, followed by us, T'Gallant, Paringa, and then Mantons Creek. There's also about another ten which offer cellar door-cum-café dining. If you can get people through the doors to your restaurant, the more they're likely to buy your wine. They associate it with an enjoyable experience, which gives you a great head start when they're confronted by 20 chardonnays in the bottle shop.

## **Why has the winery restaurant concept become so popular?**

I suppose it's a major point of difference. You're tapping into a real romance about wine and vineyards. I think everyone now recognises that food and wine is a very strong match, and when you have a view over a vineyard like we have here, then that synergy is even better.

Peninsula wineries are now attracting a lot of recognition and appreciation, especially for their chardonnays and pinots. We're being taken very seriously down here, as opposed to the mainly hobby vineyards of a decade ago – we have some serious players doing exceptional quality wines.

## **Have you noticed any change in dining during your eight years on the Peninsula?**

We've come a very long way in being able to provide a consistently good overall product, and that includes reliability of suppliers and attracting quality staff. Customers now expect

city-quality service, not a rustic country eatery. The food, staff and the ambience have to be spot-on. It used to be a big job getting quality staff, but a lot of people now see the potential and growth within our industry. The professionalism of what is being done down here has taken a huge step forward. There are only 11 Chef's Hat restaurants in regional Victoria and three of them are here, within 10 minutes of each other.

## **What's the next big thing in dining?**

Regardless of trends I think people are always looking for light, fresh and flavoursome food. They want something that has had a bit of love devoted to it, but is not over-worked. Sure, they often want some originality, but they also want it to be authentic and to be derived from a traditional base. People really enjoy tasting different flavours and styles of food rather than, say, full blown French Provincial or Chinese cuisine. It's a hard balancing act for a chef to authentically produce many different elements from various cuisines.

## **Is the average diner becoming more discerning?**

Absolutely, and so they should be, because the price of dining out is not cheap and the cost pressures on restaurants are quite intense. People are quick to spot a fake because they know their product, they know quality and they use the recommendations of foodies and roving critics.

The critics can pull you up on anything that is not quite right, which can be frustrating, but it does keep you honest – smoke and mirrors don't work any more.

The Age Good Food Guide's assessments are totally anonymous, which gives them a lot of credibility. They visit three times, but we never know when they're in, so they get the same quality and service as everyone else. That's a pretty fair way to rate a restaurant, I think.

## **Does taking your 'weekend' in the middle of the week have advantages?**

A lot of advantage in summer, when you can't find a car space or get a towel on the beach. However, it's frustrating any other time because I have children aged 8, 4 and 2, and the time you



have to spend with them is very short in this business. Having said that, if you look at what we have here compared to what I would have if I worked in the city, then there's no comparison – the quality of life down here is just sensational.

## **Where do you go for a local dining experience, or is it just fish and chips at home?**

Both actually. Pierre's food in Albert Street, Mornington is sensational. He has had a battle since coming out from London, but the restaurant is now going from strength to strength. For a casual lunch we might head to Max's at Red Hill, Montalto Vineyard or Pier 10. We love going out for both personal and professional reasons, but because it's such a small region it's hard to go out for a quiet meal without being recognised.

## **What would you advise a customer to do after having lunch at Salix?**

About half our people are here visiting friends and relatives, so they're happy to just sit, chat and eat. Others want to do a beach walk afterwards and visit other good wineries, so I'll suggest a walk on Balnarring Beach, or through Seawinds Park on Arthurs Seat

## **Where is your favourite place?**

Definitely home. Otherwise it would have to be Arthurs Seat because of its stunning views. Rebecca and I often go up with the kids and take a picnic lunch. They run around in the park and we just sit and look out over the southern peninsula, down to Point Nepean and the Heads – the sunsets are a major bonus.

## **Which side do you favour: bayside or Westernport?**

There's certainly two 'tribes' on the Peninsula, and most people are really divided over that question. I have a business on the Westernport side and live on Port Phillip, so I'll pass on that one thankyou, rather than alienating a lot of people.

## **If you could tear yourself away from the Peninsula, where could you see yourself operating?**

It would have to be by the beach, so maybe the Tathra-Bermagui area of southern NSW, or along the Great Ocean Road, but with my family down this way, great schools and an amazing lifestyle, why would I consider anywhere else?

