

Zac Poulier

Stillwater Runs Deep

by Tim Bracher

Zac Poulier laughs that his background in dishwashing, psychiatric nursing and cooking for Hollywood celebrities is probably the ideal combination of experience needed to run a restaurant. The Frankston born and bred chef was educated at John Paul College and Melbourne High School. After a year of nursing, Zac began his hospitality career washing dishes at Frankston's Grand Hotel. He started a cooking apprenticeship at The Moorooduc Coolstores, followed by a Toorak Road café, then finishing it at Rockman's Regency, where he ended up as Executive Sous Chef.

A stint at Max's in Red Hill brought him back to the Peninsula, before entering the cut-throat world of London's CBD restaurant scene.

Between jobs in London, he walked into a restaurant work agency. Within 5 days he was on his way to Morocco, working as Russell Crowe's personal chef during the filming of 'Gladiator', bringing him into contact with many of the Hollywood 'A' list. After an international lifestyle that would make a travel agent's head spin, he returned to Melbourne in 2003 with Bendigo-born Jacqui, whom he first met at Rockman's Regency, then reunited with again at London's Oxo Tower Brasserie.

As the co-owners of 'Stillwater' - the new restaurant overlooking the Crittenden family's idyllic lake - Zac and Jacqui Poulier are now revelling in the beauty and lifestyle of the Peninsula, as well as the thrill of running their own place.

Who or what has had the biggest influence on your career?

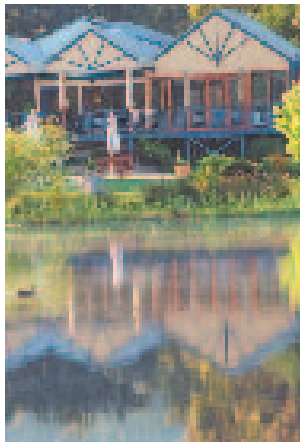
Max Pagnoni would have to be the big influence - both while at The Coolstores and then at Red Hill; just being there at the beginning of my cooking career and pointing me in the right direction. I also learned a hell of a lot about food and the importance of quality produce under Trevor Bilney, the Executive Chef at Rockman's.

Were you just part of Russell's 'hired help' or did he and his friends include you as part of their Aussie gang?

No, I was embraced as part of the team. Being an Aussie certainly helped, and being able to cook was a major bonus! The Aussies in Hollywood tend to stick together a bit because they usually worked with each other from an early age. Russell worked with Nicole back when they were a lot younger.

After life with the celluloid glitterati, is it a comedown to be back among mere mortals?

It's lovely being back down here. We have lived in Santorini (Greece), we've been through the Middle East, Mexico, the States, a lot of Europe and we've come back to find that what we have here is pretty special. It's something you don't appreciate when you're living here - you usually have to go away to find out.



How does the Peninsula stack-up against many of the 'in' places around the world?

It's pretty amazing. There's so much down here - up in the hinterland and the back beaches. That Esplanade Drive to Mt Martha is like something in Greece or the Amalfi Coastline. We had planned to get married in Santorini, but for various reasons we couldn't. The only other place I wanted to get married was down here, so we ended up at Max's Restaurant on Valentine's Day in 2003.

How is it different to the Peninsula that you left behind?

I'm amazed at the number of places now available to eat at - top restaurants to little cafes. I think the number of people who now choose to live here but work in Melbourne has made it a lot more cosmopolitan. They eat out more regularly, whereas before it might have been a once a month treat.

What prompted the evolution from the Crittenden's casual lakeside eatery to a full blown restaurant?

We saw the lease advert in The Age last year and I'd been down here a couple of times, so I knew the setting. I'd opened numerous restaurants for others and felt as though we were wasting our skills doing it for other people, so we decided to do something for ourselves. We could have kept it low key, but you can't run a profitable restaurant on that basis and we both immediately saw the real potential for the place.

What changes have you made?

We have done a lot of cosmetic work, such as lighting and décor, as well as updating the kitchen and bar. We want to be recognised as one of the best restaurants here on the Peninsula, so we made sure that everything we purchased was of top quality - European crystal glassware, quality cutlery, crockery and so on. We are serious about our food and the menu changes to reflect seasonality and availability of local and free-range produce.

In saying that, we have still retained the relaxed, friendly atmosphere that everybody loves about the venue.

You re-branded it as 'Stillwater'?

Yes, the name Stillwater reflects the beauty of the lake and because Garry has now sunk a bore, we'll be able to keep water in it permanently. It's a great place for weddings - we're almost booked out already this year for wedding functions.

I suppose the down side of having so many local eateries is that you have to work hard to differentiate your restaurant?

We could be the most avant garde restaurant on the Peninsula, but there's no market for that style - George Colombaris has had a battle even in central Melbourne. So, we aim to provide value for money. We're not the cheapest restaurant in town, but we use only top quality produce. It's all local and free range when we can get it.

We complement the food with Garry's Schinus wines, the Crittenden at Dromana range and his new Pinocchio range under the Geppeto label. We also have a good range of French and Italian wines that Garry imports, which we provide at very reasonable prices.

Do you have any specialties in the food line that people particularly remember or that you love preparing?

I love the double-cooked duck with Ellisfield Farm Sour Morello Cherries - it goes beautifully with the Reserve Pinot.

The eye fillet steak we serve here is fantastic - it's from the local Angus Beef studs, hand picked by Point Nepean Meats. It's hanged for a month, then we hang it for another three or four days. Giving your product a lot of love and attention along the way carries through to the end result on the plate.

Where do you and Jacqui eat when you can get away from here?

Anywhere we can. We enjoy the Long Table and Max's in Red Hill. We head to Il Postino from time to time and that little Japanese place in Mornington 'Kazu' is a real gem.

You've had a good opening season, so have you fulfilled your vision already?

No, we're just starting. There are plans for a wood fired oven down by the terrace and a gazebo area for live music and wedding ceremonies. We have lots of exciting plans and events coming up in the next 12-18 months.

What would you serve Russell if he popped in for lunch tomorrow?

I'd say he would ask for a Massaman Curry and he'd probably go for Garry's Reserve Chardonnay, or perhaps the Pinot - he's more a red drinker. He knows we've started up our own place, but unfortunately he doesn't get down to Melbourne very often.