

15 minutes of fame...

Cooking with care, Aussie master-chef Neil Perry is passionate about responsible consumption.

Neil Perry quite literally dictates good taste – as the menu designer for Qantas Airway’s International First and Business Class he decides what many travellers’ will experience as their first taste of Australian cuisine, while his adoring public at home and abroad snap up his cookbooks, wait hungrily for his next television series, and line up eagerly for a table at his legendary Rockpool Restaurant in Sydney, voted one of the best in the world by prestigious Restaurant magazine.

If you can’t make it to Sydney don’t despair; I+ caught up with this globe-trotting super-chef when he recently hosted a weekend on fusion cooking at the glamorous Trisara in Phuket, where Neil has become the consultant chef. “The guys at Trisara do the most wonderful job – they are sublime cooks. We love the way they are executing Rockpool’s signature dishes and we hope to continue working in a way that allows the customers the very best of both worlds. They have the option of eating some wonderfully prepared traditional Thai food – or they can choose the Rockpool experience.”



What brought you into the kitchen?

I was working as a waiter at the age of 24, but slowly it became clear I wanted to be on the other side of the pass. I started working with some incredible talents (Stephanie Alexander and Damien Pignolet amongst others) and there was no turning back.

Most formative food and cooking memories

My earliest food memories are of my dad – he was the butcher, the fisherman and the gardener – and wonderfully skilled at all of them plus he was a fantastic



cook. He had an amazing effect on me but I didn’t really realise it until later. I had an exceptional upbringing – my dad taught me the nuts and bolts of what I am today.

Overall food philosophy

“The cornerstone of good cooking is to source the finest produce”...that is it, quite simply. That is the philosophy that has driven my restaurants over the years and a philosophy I believe in one hundred percent. The more knowledgeable consumers become about what they are eating, the bigger responsibility we have, as restaurateurs to educate them. My philosophy has not changed over the years, but the depth behind it grows. It is important that we protect the environment and

make our planet healthy that our children may enjoy its bounties. There is a greater responsibility to fish without raping the oceans, to eat animals that have been reared in the proper fashion, to enjoy the taste of an egg that is bio-dynamic – we appreciate quality like never before.

What inspires you?

The people that run my restaurants – their loyalty, beautiful food and fantastic wine, travel, the small producers and suppliers who work so hard at creating and finding incredible products, my wife and children.

Molecular gastronomy – ever been tempted to dabble?

Yes! All the time... been playing around with bits and pieces for a while now.

What attracts you to Asian food or cooking?

The honesty and simplicity of the food, they don't beg, borrow or steal from other cuisines – they are true to themselves. And of course the sensational clean flavours – ginger and shallot – brilliance in simplicity!

Food heroes

They start with my dad – he taught me that eating was for pleasure, not fuel, and that if food was learnt about, then it was remembered. Today, I am continually inspired by the great chefs that cook with love and passion; Thomas Keller, Heston Blumenthal, Alain Ducasse, Rose and Ruth from the River Café and all those guys doing mad and wonderful things in Spain!

Best meal you've ever eaten and why?

Well, hopefully it is yet to come, and it may involve razor clams in New York, wagyu beef in Melbourne, truffles, foie gras and Bordeaux in Paris.... or perhaps braised octopus and beef cheek with a fantastic glass of Rioja in San Sebastian! Or maybe it will be Rockpool-style squid ink noodles with squid, prawn, chilli, coriander and smokehouse bacon, eaten whilst sitting on the balcony at Trisara staring at the perfect sunset!

On the subject of celebrity chef consultancies, Maria Kuhn, Director of PR for the Four Seasons Thailand was quoted as saying that "All too often, you now have celebrity chefs who make an appearance now and then, but have no clear control over what is actually produced in the kitchen. It



almost seems like a lack of respect for the customers."

What do you think?

It is a dangerous and all too easy trap to fall into – the one of over commitment and spreading yourself too thin. I am married to my work (just ask my wife) and it is one of my greatest joys. The energy and pace at which I travel to be a living breathing part of my restaurants and consultancies is what keeps me alive. I am also lucky enough to have the most loyal staff in the world. The people that run my restaurants – both in the kitchen and on the floor – and those that head my consultancy team – are lifers, they have been with me for years and years. With people like these at the helm I can put faith and trust in the job happening the way I want it to happen. They know me and they know the Rockpool brand. Without them – it would be impossible.

What new projects do you have on the horizon at the moment?

I could tell you but I'd have to kill you.