



From little seeds, big dishes grow

Australia's top chef destresses in his garden, writes **Jane Hutchinson**.

YOU might imagine the nation's most celebrated chef would spend his free time swanning around in expensive cars, sipping vintage champagne and being fed foie gras by a harem of attentive kitchen hands. But the truth is, you're more likely to find Peter Gilmore trowel in hand, dirt under his fingernails, mucking around in his backyard vegie patch.

"It's a fantastic stress release," says the unassuming 42-year-old, who, as head chef at Quay, has propelled the Sydney harbourside restaurant to 27th on the prestigious S. Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants list — the highest ranking for any Australian eatery.

"I like to get out into the garden for a couple of hours whenever I have a day off."

He may have access to the most exotic and expensive ingredients money can buy but he says there's not much that makes him happier than harvesting a handful of radishes to throw into a salad for dinner.

Not that the radishes Gilmore grows are your common garden variety. Rather, they're the rare red-core breed, with a starburst of colour in the centre. His cucumbers are an exotic sour Mexican variety and his lentils, black beluga. This is no ordinary garden but an incubator of inspiration for his restaurant.

"I call it my test garden," Gilmore explains. "I use it to try out all sorts

of different things, to see what will work and what I can do with them."

Gilmore's garden is also the inspiration for his first cookbook, a 287-page tome titled *Quay: Food Inspired by Nature*. The volume elevates the organic beauty of vegetables and fruits to high art in a series of exquisitely photogenic and, it must be said, exquisitely complicated recipes, all drawn from the Quay menu.

Among the 68 featured dishes are a suite of jewel-like Sea Pearls — iridescent spheres capturing the flavours of myriad marine creatures; an achingly beautiful salad featuring four varieties of heirloom tomato (pictured); and, of course, Gilmore's Guava Snow Egg — arguably Australia's most famous dessert. The confection — a poached meringue orb with a nucleus of custard-apple ice-cream and a shell of caramelised maltose tuile — was presented as the ultimate technical challenge at the finale of last season's *MasterChef*. But it's by no means the most complex dish in the book. A salad of spring vegetables, herbs and flowers demands 43 ingredients, while the instructions for Eight Textured Chocolate Cake runs across three densely worded pages.

Still, the usually affable Gilmore looks slightly miffed when I suggest his book — two years in the making — is likely to spend more time on the coffee table than beside the stove.

"I guess some will see it as just something lovely to look at but you shouldn't underestimate the general public," he says. "I believe there are a lot of passionate home chefs out there who would be happy to spend half a day making an Eight Textured Chocolate Cake."

Lengthy though they are, Gilmore points out many of the recipes involve components that can be prepared in advance and assembled at the last minute. And even if you don't have the inclination to prepare his slow-braised pig cheek with celeriac cream and mushrooms, you could just make the celeriac cream to accompany grilled fish.

But the book, Gilmore says, is intended as more than just a collection of recipes. "I wanted it to





make a statement about where food in Australia is at now.”

He believes Australian cuisine has been underestimated on the world stage in recent years. “There’s been so much focus on what’s happening in Spain and Scandinavia now, we tend to get overlooked a bit. Everyone knows we have great produce and a willingness to push the boundaries but I think a lot of people are surprised when they see how refined our food is now.”

Of course, Gilmore himself has played no small part in raising the bar. His passion was sparked as a toddler, accompanying his enthusiastic mother to cooking classes.

By seven, he had mastered pancakes

and at 12, he’d made up his mind he wanted to be a chef. When he did work experience in the kitchen of a Sydney restaurant in year 10, the managers were so impressed, they offered him a job.

At 32, he achieved his first chef’s hat, cooking at a restaurant on Sydney’s northern beaches. Moving to Quay the following year, it took him less than 12 months to achieve the ultimate prize, three hats in the *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* — an accolade he has retained for the nine years since.

While Gilmore is celebrated for the gloriously organic beauty of his dishes, he says his signature style has really evolved only in the past five or six years, since planting his home vegie patch.

“Gardening really opened up a whole lot of ideas. It started me thinking about the life cycle of plants and I became passionate about representing nature in my food.”

His garden has also opened up a trove of rare and heirloom plant varieties that Gilmore sources

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PETER GILMORE

through Seed Savers catalogues and specialist suppliers. An exotic edible flower or heirloom carrot variety from the backyard might inspire a new dish for the Quay menu or add a fresh dimension to an old idea.

Gilmore has developed strong ties with organic farmers in the Blue Mountains who grow what he needs in larger quantities.

It has proven a winning strategy. Aside from its official inclusion among the world’s best restaurants, Quay has taken out the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* Restaurant of the Year award for three years running and has been showered with a host of other accolades. But Gilmore admits there’s a downside to being

named the country’s best chef — no one wants to invite him to dinner. “What they don’t realise is that we chefs love to have someone else cook for us.” And they don’t have to use 43 ingredients.

Quay: Food Inspired by Nature, by Peter Gilmore. Murdoch Books, \$95.



