

Chefs' table

What do some of the best head chefs in Melbourne cook when they come together? The top chefs from Andrew McConnell's Melbourne restaurant group take up our chefs' table challenge: to cook each other a dish that reps the industry right now.

PHOTOS SAMARA CLIFFORD

Walking through the door at Cutler & Co on a weekday morning, I need sunglasses to cope with the sheer volume of chef's whites before me. The head honchos from Andrew McConnell's restaurant group are assembling for a group photo. They meet sporadically for work and play, but someone jokes that getting all these head chefs around one table for a formal shoot is like spotting a white rhino.

They're here to cook for each other; to present a dish they think is representative of their style, their restaurant and what's happening in the food scene at the moment.

But first, the photo. We line up the top talent from Cutler & Co, Marion, Cumulus Inc, Cumulus Up, Supernormal, Supernormal Canteen, Meatsmith and the Builders Arms, along with the man himself, chef-restaurateur Andrew McConnell.

The other reason we're here is for a birthday celebration: Cutler & Co, the most-awarded of Andrew's restaurant collection, has recently turned 10. "I wanted to create the quality of a fine-dining restaurant without the pomp and ceremony, and I think after 10 years we've maintained that, and that's what has set us apart from other fine-dining restaurants in Melbourne," Andrew says.

The dining space was spruced up 18 months ago with more booths to keep things informal and some other minor adjustments, like a destination bar – a walk-up space where you can get a killer McConnell burger.

"The whole environment in Fitzroy has changed a lot," Andrew says. "Gertrude Street has changed. I had a bit of a battle with my bank manager when I took him to Gertrude Street 12 years ago and he was a little bit aghast."

Andrew refers to his restaurant group rather modestly as a "happy accident", but there's a lot of thought put into the menu and the culture surrounding each opening. The team is carefully selected and trained, and it seems many interstate chefs setting the food scene alight have a McConnell joint on their resume.

"What I like is that people use the restaurants in different ways than what we intended," he says. "For example, Cumulus Inc is one of the busiest spots in Melbourne for business meetings. It's great that people use it as a breakout space, so it has that hum and buzz all day."

Because of the diversity of restaurants – from butchers and fine diners to pan-Asian dining – Andrew's group is a bellwether for the current dining scene. And with that, let the cook-off commence...



**Colin Mains
CUTLER & CO**
The dish: salt-baked chicken, radish, garlic cream and bacon

Colin Mains took the head chef role in Cutler & Co just over a year ago, but has been cooking for over a decade. Originally from Scotland, Colin worked in both his hometown and France before heading to the Bentley restaurant group in Sydney. His previous role was at Cumulus Up before moving to the decade-old fine diner.

"We wrap the chicken in pancetta and then coat it in a salt crust made from salt, coriander, fennel seeds, flour and egg white," Colin says. "We then roast it when the order comes on and it steams inside the salt crust."

The chicken comes to the table and is revealed in a bit of theatre then taken away and carved up and served with deep-fried legs in a fennel glaze "for a fun take on fried chicken".

Colin says he finds it the best way to cook the chicken, but it's also part of the current revival of classic cooking methods. "Classic never dies," he says. "When I started getting into cooking 10 years ago it was all molecular, and those times have completely gone. What excites our chefs, especially for me at Cutler & Co, is bringing back classic techniques."

As for what dish grabs his eye on the chefs' table today, he's backing another classic, this time from Cumulus Inc. "For me, after having worked at Cumulus Inc, the lamb shoulder is not something that is going to come off the menu there," Colin says. "To be honest, it's one of my favourite dishes in Melbourne."



CUTLER & CO'S CHICKEN BEFORE IT'S PLATED UP



**Sam Cheetham
CUMULUS INC**
The dish: slow roast lamb shoulder, almond and roasted red pepper with black barley, charred sweet corn and pumpkin seeds

Sam Cheetham has been in the kitchen at Cumulus Inc for about 18 months and has been cooking for 16 years. He says Cumulus is a versatile space where you can come for a solo coffee and cannoli or experience the whole menu "and come and have a rowdy night".

The dish Sam has brought to the chefs' table is a staple of Australian cuisine. "We're doing the Cumulus Inc lamb shoulder and we're doing it with our black barley and corn salad," Sam says. "Grain salad is a Cumulus trait and this is our 2019 version of it."

For Sam, this dish displays the produce-led focus that Cumulus and the industry has at the moment. "It's important we are using Australian ingredients and this grain is new as an Australian ingredient – we are very lucky to use it," he says.

Sam also supports the idea that kitchens are currently paring things back. "They're losing the unnecessary components of dishes," he says.



Aside from the lamb though, what dish today takes Sam's fancy? "I really like the calamari, XO sauce and saltbush from Supernormal Canteen," he says. "Australian calamari is good produce to use in general and there's a lot of Asian influence in what we do now."



**Perry Schagen
SUPERNORMAL
CANTEEN**
The dish: grilled calamari, XO, herbs and saltbush

Perry Schagen reps Supernormal Canteen and has been with Andrew McConnell's group for about three years. He says Supernormal Canteen is about quality produce, seasonality and accessibility – but they like to spice things up. To that end, the dish Perry is whipping up for his colleagues is a hibachi-grilled arrow squid with



CUMULUS INC'S BLACK BARLEY, CORN AND PUMPKIN SEEDS SIDE DISH

XO sauce and saltbush, another dish that represents the less-is-more approach to cooking. "There's a focus on sustainable fishing. It's a local product, but it's also a simple dish," Perry says.

Sustainability also comes through in the choice of arrow squid as the main ingredient as kitchens move to using less popular seafood in an attempt to stave off overfishing. "We like to present it as a whole squid on the plate. It looks quite impressive as the arrow squid has a pointed tail at the back," he says. "And it's a local catch and it's not as popular as the calamari or the well-known squids."

Perry says the industry is moving towards "cleaner, healthier, more plant-based eating" and slowly getting over the burgers and fried chicken that has dominated menus of late.

"There's still a place for it. Don't get me wrong, I love my burgers and fried chicken, but there's more of a drive towards plant-based eating for many reasons."



THE ARROW SQUID IS PUT ON THE JAPANESE GRILL

"Don't get me wrong, I love my burgers and fried chicken, but there's more of a drive towards plant-based eating for many reasons"



MARK GLENN AND SAM CHEETHAM IN A CUTLER & CO BOOTH



Mark Glenn
CUMULUS UP
The dish: buffalo ricotta gnocchi, zucchini and basil

Cumulus Up's dish is one that focuses on the plant-based food movement. Head chef Mark Glenn says he's heavily influenced by the seasons; this seasonality is driven by the restaurant's relationship with the farmers, so what's in season governs what's on the plate. The chefs aren't creating dishes and then looking for ingredients.

Such an approach helps to refine the cooking process. "Chefs are chefs – we're going to try to make things too technical," Mark says. "But having a limited amount of time between knowing what product you're able to find and putting it on a menu means our focus is on flavour first and technique second."

The dish itself is very Melbourne, Mark says, as it's part-Italian, part-Asian, all served up in Australia – at once diverse and very local.

Mark loves the seafood on offer along the Victorian coast and thinks the food industry at the moment is in a "pretty good place" despite the odd misstep into Instagram food territory.

As for his dish of the day, Mark really likes the corn and barley salad from Cumulus Inc. "That is what I think this group is about," he says. "The barley is the only organic black barley in Australia, and now we are using it everywhere."



Sascha Randle
MEATSMITH
The dish: coq au vin (pictured on page 63)

Sascha Randle is from butcher Meatsmith and became head chef there two years ago on the back of a 20-year career. Meatsmith, says Sascha, sits apart from the other restaurants to some degree because of the different parameters of running a specialty butcher as opposed to a restaurant.

For Sascha, Melbourne kitchens are moving away from the idea of throwing everything at the plate. "I think we're slowly moving towards allowing ingredients to speak for themselves," she says. With that philosophy, Sascha's dish of a classic coq au vin makes perfect sense. The chicken is the star, cooked with red wine, mushrooms, bacon and onion. "We do a range of restaurant-quality, take-home meals," she says. "There are no shortcuts; it's done exactly as I would do in a restaurant."

Sascha says Melburnians are spoilt for choice when it comes to food and she loves heading out to the regions, with King Valley a particular favourite. Asked to pick a favourite dish of the day, though, Sascha says it's too hard – and that they all respect the ingredients.

"There's a trend in Melbourne cafes for overworked, weirdly colourful things with strange garnishes and micro herbs, and I would like to see that go"

CUMULUS UP'S BUFFALO RICOTTA GNOCCHI, ZUCCHINI AND BASIL



Natasha Burnett
MARION
The dish: mussels with fried bread and nduja

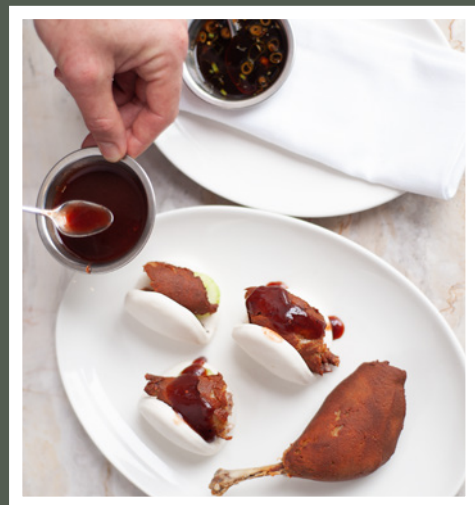
Natasha Burnett has been head chef at Marion for less than a year. However, she has been in the industry for 14 years and says Marion is proud to have a menu that changes with the seasons.

That said, the mussels dish is one that's very rarely off the Marion tables due to its popularity. For Natasha, it represents simple, delicious food.

Keeping things simple is also in line with other things Natasha has been seeing in the food industry, namely sustainability and a reduction in waste. "I'm definitely not a big fan of the Instagram breakfast stuff," she says. "There's a trend in Melbourne cafes for overworked, weirdly colourful things with strange garnishes and micro herbs, and I would like to see that go."

Natasha also says the Victorian regions are growing fast when it comes to good food. "Obviously there's Birregurra and going to Brae, but even Geelong with Hot Chicken Project, and Anglesea has Captain Midnight," she says. "Matt Germanchis is doing great things out at Captain Moonlight."

And the dish she's most looking forward to from her comrades? "The smell of the calamari with the XO sauce is really great," she says. "And another one is the chicken from Cutler & Co. It always looks really amazing."



Ben Pollard
SUPERNORMAL
The dish: duck bao, twice-cooked duck leg, vinegar and plum sauce

Ben Pollard currently holds a culinary development role in the group but is repping Supernormal, Andrew McConnell's pan-Asian diner in the CBD. Ben has been with the group for two years and cooking for two decades. Supernormal blends Korean, Chinese and Japanese flavours with great local produce.

Ben loves that his duck bao dish is interactive: you shred the duck yourself, assemble the bao, and then make a very happy mess of yourself while eating it. Ben believes this hands-on approach is something every good meal should have.

"Melbourne is such a buzzing city," Ben says. "And the produce is great down here. It's great in other capital cities, but the weather in Melbourne is quite extreme compared to Sydney – it gets super hot and super cold – so you get different vegetables working here. And when it's really cold outside you can put on some hearty meals."

He's also another chef who's excited by his sister restaurant's dish of calamari with XO sauce. "We haven't collaborated," he laughs. "It's just a really punchy dish. I've noticed chefs go towards the punchy dishes. If you get a bunch of chefs together, you know what other chefs are going to order from the flavour profile. We're tasting a lot during the day, so you want something to really wow you."



Andy Barkham
THE BUILDERS ARMS
The dish: flathead, parsley, lemon and capers

When the Builders Arms retired Asian diner Ricky & Pinky and reopened as the Bistro, it was 20-year veteran Andy who came on board as head chef. The Fitzroy pub now focuses on making the best use of the rotisserie with a menu that's reminiscent of a "great old British boozier".

Andy's dish of flathead reps Melbourne's love of seafood. The fish used changes regularly, but is always sustainable and local. "When people come into the pub, they want to see pub food," he says.

Andy returns to the theme of his colleagues: that classics are back in style, and adds that he doesn't think we have reached peak burger. "People will travel a long way for a burger, and the burger here [at Cutler & Co] is one of our best sellers," he says.

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MEATSMITH'S CLASSIC COD AU VIN

The head chef has worked at every restaurant in the group except for Supernormal Canteen, and he says being in touch with so many head chefs helps them all stay abreast of what's going on within the industry.

When it comes to backing one of his colleagues' dishes currently coming out of the Cutler & Co kitchen for us all, he too is firmly in the calamari and XO sauce camp. "You're taking a sustainable product caught locally in Port Phillip Bay, then you have the mix of the Asian ingredients with classic Australian native produce," he says. "I think that pretty much sums up the cultural mix of Melbourne right now."

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