

NEW MAN AT THE TOP

For a chef at the height of his powers, owning Sydney's Summit Restaurant is just deserts for Michael Moore.

By *Sheridan Rogers.*

Photography *Andy Baker*

From the moment the lift took off, my head was spinning – when you travel 47 floors in 42 seconds it's bound to have some effect. But that was just the beginning. No sooner had my feet touched the ground than it began to spin again, and not just because the view over the Sydney skyline is so spectacular. The dining and bar area of this restaurant literally spins.

The Summit, after all, is one of the world's largest revolving restaurants with a 360 degree view of Sydney landmarks, including the Opera House, Harbour Bridge and Luna Park. On a clear day you can see the Blue Mountains.

Opened in 1968, appropriately enough by the world's most famous scaler of great heights, Sir Edmund Hillary, it's been given a shake-up by its new owner, celebrity chef Michael Moore. He and a silent partner take control this month but Moore has been at the restaurant for the past couple of years, working (in close association with the Accor hotel group) on rebuilding its flagging reputation.

It's a big leap for the boy from Portsmouth, England, though not the first he's taken in a career which has spanned two continents over a quarter of a century. "I've put pretty much everything I've got into it and more," he says. »

“But I’ve done 2½ years due diligence, and turnover has increased 50 per cent in that time.”

Having set up and opened the Bluebird Gastrodome in London in 1995 for Terence Conran, one of the world’s leading restaurateurs, Moore is well aware of the risks involved in the restaurant game. He also knows the Sydney scene, having owned Pruniers, Bluefin, Bonne Femme and Bouillon at different times and been a consultant to Bennelong and Wildfire. Even so, Sydney diners are a fickle lot and Moore has stiff competition from the all-new 360 Bar & Dining in Centrepoint Tower.

When he first took over at The Summit there were purple tablecloths in the bar. “A lot of people had put their fingers on it and it looked terrible,” he says. “But I knew that if it was in London or Paris or Tokyo or Singapore, it would be one of the greatest and most talked-about restaurants in town. I love running big, busy, high-profile restaurants and this place has the potential to be one of the best in the world.”

Now the look is more subdued and elegant, incorporating classic Harry Berioia wire dining chairs, a black suede padded wall, a stunning Campari-bottle-lined bar and hip pink-lit Orbit Lounge. And the food? Classic flavours repackaged, such as the twice-cooked pork belly with glass crackling – a new take on traditional roast pork, with apple and a sweet red salad of sherry-glazed beetroot, toffee-crusteds walnuts and creamed goat’s cheese.

Moore is very conscious of the wow factor in innovative food presentation (“I want to surprise, to move people outside of their expectations”) and the wow factor in The Summit’s position. “It’s great during the day but even better at night. Sydney is such a beautiful city and on summer evenings, with the ferries going back and forth, it’s just gorgeous.”

He is also aware of the pulling power of celebrities – Summit regulars include Sarah and Lachlan Murdoch, Jamie Durie, and Sarah-Jane Clarke and Heidi Middleton (Sass & Bide). Moore was just 18 when he had his first close encounter with a ‘60s Hollywood sex symbol. “I’d just started at the Cafe Royale in London,” he recalls, “and was carving some turkey at the buffet for Marvin Hagler [world middleweight boxing champion at the time]. We started talking

and I was sort of falling over my words, and then Raquel Welch walked in and the whole room went deadily silent. She was just the most beautiful woman in the world at the time, at her peak. That was the first time that I’d ever seen the real magnetism a world-class celebrity has.”

Stars today don’t handle their allure so well. “More often than not they come up the goods lift or through the kitchen. They’re wearing Gautier and whatever, all the fantastic stuff, but they don’t get to walk in the front door like everyone else does; they get to sneak in the back.

“I did Nicole Kidman’s mum’s 60th birthday at Pruniers in Woollahra and they booked it out. All the A-listers in Sydney at the time were at the party. The paparazzi were hiding among the foliage in the adjacent park, Chiswick Gardens.

“We’d screened it off and Nicole came in the back door, through the kitchen. At Bluebird, people like George Michael would come in and sit in the corner, face to the wall. In fact, a lot of them miss out, they miss out on a lot of things.”

But it’s not just the paparazzi who are intrusive nowadays. Moore tells the story of being out in Sydney recently with the fiery celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, one of a handful of British chefs to have received the ultimate three Michelin stars for one of their restaurants.

“We were standing at the downstairs bar in The Establishment, having a chat, and a guy came up in the middle, put his arms around both of us and stood there,” Moore says. “Then his friend came up and just put the camera straight in his face. It was not, ‘Can I have your picture?’ or ‘How are you doing?’”

The rise of the celebrity chef is one of the more curious fads of our age. Many – such as Gordon Ramsay and French chef Alain Ducasse

– owner of three three-star restaurants no less, plus the Jules Verne Restaurant 125m up in the Eiffel Tower, which he took over this year – have gone from serving celebrities to being celebs. Moore recalls a day at Bluebird when three super-chefs were all dining in the restaurant at the same time.

"Alain Ducasse [and British-based] Marco Pierre White and Raymond Blanc were there, along with 250 others. Afterwards Ducasse came for a tour around the kitchen and asked me for the recipe for the snapper puttanesca that I'd created. I was really knocked out."

Yet another recipe request came from Dustin Hoffman. "I was in the kitchen which was glassed off from the restaurant. Someone was knocking on the window and I turned around to find Dustin Hoffman with his thumbs up. He'd just finished lunch."

Moore waved him into the kitchen. "He came round and said, 'The lunch was fantastic, I love this place, it's just great, how do you run a restaurant so big – how did you make that dish?' So we showed him how to make the pasta dish and he said, 'I love that. Do you know it's my birthday next week? I'm coming back. Can you do my birthday party?' So he came back the following week with 12 people and had that pasta dish for his birthday."

"He's a good example of a real celebrity. He could be an absolute prima donna and very difficult but in fact he is totally the opposite. He's the most humble, down-to-earth, arm-around-you, talk-to-the-staff type of person."

Early days at Bluebird were eye-opening. "The opening party was like a who's who of London," says Moore. "Five hundred people, a massive night, everyone from Ringo Starr to the big movie stars, all the models, Jasmin and Simon Le Bon. It was owned by Mark Knopfler, the lead guy of Dire Straits."

"I remember being in a meeting discussing the budget. Conran is a great designer but he loves to spend money and the budget was blown out, and Mark Knopfler said, 'Okay, I can fix that no problem.' He went and did an unplugged concert – or maybe it was three concerts – in New York. He probably made a million pounds or something in a week and came back and said, 'Right, that will fix up the kitchen downstairs.' That's the way these guys operate."

Mind you, even big stars have to queue in London. "There was one day when the restaurant was absolutely packed. I remember going down to the cafe and there was Joan Collins waiting in the queue to get in."

"She was with a couple of minders, one behind and one in front of her. All dolled up, just going out for a panino and a coffee. That was the power of the Bluebird but also the power of London as well. You might be a celebrity but at the end of the day, you're in the queue along with all the other people."

Just how many stars the new-look Summit will attract only an astrologer can tell. Moore knows that word of mouth will carry the day. In truth, every customer is a star and a critic, so every dish must be as perfect as the last.



Very Moore-ish: Pork belly topped with julienned apple and baby cress, and the prandial "Martini", a soup of sweet summer corn and blue swimmer crab. Above: The Summit cocktail lounge.

