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FRENCH TWOIST



Acclaimed chef Bruno Loubet is back from London – fired up about vegetables and an ambitious new venture, *writes Kylie Lang*

Bruno Loubet has made a career of defying expectations, and he's not done yet. After eight frenetic years in London, where he turned the tables on tradition by making vegetables the star of the dish and meat the understudy at Grain Store restaurant, Michelin-starred Loubet is back, and on a mission.

The 56-year-old Frenchman wants to convert Australians to plant-based eating. Just don't call him a vegetarian.

Loubet, who grew up on a farm in Bordeaux and first moved to Queensland in 2001, still eats meat, especially from animals he's raised himself.

But the chef, who not so long ago wowed diners with his boudin blanc and beef cheeks at Bruno's Tables in Toowong, Berardo's in Noosa and Baguette in Ascot, has come to believe that vegetables should – indeed must – become the focus of how we eat.

Newly settled on 8.5 hectares at Willow Vale, in the Gold Coast hinterland, with his wife of 35 years Catherine and a menagerie of animals, Loubet is busy planting fruit trees, herbs, and terrace upon terrace of vegetables ahead of opening a cooking school later this year.

He knows he has a lot of work to do, not solely in converting a carport into a teaching kitchen and readying the family's 1890s Queenslander, with its wide verandas and leadlight windows, for guests, but in changing attitudes.

"Australians love their meat," he says, "and I don't believe in pointing the finger at people. I like the idea of eating less meat but eating better meat, so you can afford to pay a bit more because you don't eat it every day – maybe once a week – and on the other days you eat more plant-based meals.

"It means the farmer is still making his margins, and you will be healthier and help combat climate change, which is a huge, huge issue that will affect our grandchildren."

Loubet, now a grandfather of three who lost 10kg after trimming his own meat consumption, says we are using more food and water to keep animals alive than humans, and that's madness.

"We're told to take shorter showers to save water, which I do anyway, but a shower is something like 40 litres of water, and do you realise that to produce one kilo of beef you need 3000 litres of water? Eating one burger is equivalent to one month of showers." In his new venture, the goal is to take small groups of guests from picking, washing and preparing

ingredients to enjoying their creations at a shared table in the family home. Expect anything but the ordinary.

TAKING A GAMBLE

On the day *Qweekend* visits, Loubet bakes cauliflower in salt dough with miso and seaweed. Roma tomatoes are slow-roasted for two hours then left in the oven overnight to caramelize. Sweet and intensely flavoured, they sit atop ribbons of squid with parsley and garlic sauce.

"These dishes are very simple – anyone could do them. It's about having the confidence to know you can," he says.

"I used to say to my chefs, 'If you take a child from three years and they eat more plant-based meals – and obviously not just boiled vegetables with a bit of butter on top because they will be bored in five minutes – but if you start to cook like the way I'm talking about and a child eats that at home, when they reach 20 years of age and are given a piece of meat, they won't want to eat it.'"

One of Loubet's particular talents – apart from keeping a calm kitchen because "panic makes people cook like rubbish" – is introducing the element of surprise.

Diners at Grain Store – which he opened to almost instant acclaim in 2013 and closed in August 2017 – often complained of finding meat in the vegan dish "chilli con veggie", Loubet's playful take on chilli con carne.

"The waiters would guarantee them there wasn't, that it was the way we cooked the ingredients, so rich that it did taste like meat, but they'd keep asking, 'Are you sure?'"

A vegetable-driven restaurant was a big gamble when burger joints were booming, but Loubet's idea was snapped up by Mark Sainsbury and Michael Benyan, his business partners in the successful Bistrot Bruno Loubet, which opened in The Zetter Hotel in Clerkenwell in 2010.

"I'd started to look at all this wanky food from Michelin-starred restaurants – a piece of venison and one baby carrot, one flower," he recalls, "and I said to myself, 'This is a disaster; these vegetables and plants are here just as a garnish, just for bullshit, really', and then I thought, 'Wow, why not make the veg the hero?'"

The gamble paid off. Grain Store won Sustainable Restaurant of the Year, twice, and in 2016 the offshoot Grain Store Cafe and Bar opened at London's Gatwick Airport.



NEW MENU: Bruno Loubet has returned to Australia after eight years in the UK; and (above right) preparing a meal at his home at Willow Vale, in the Gold Coast hinterland. Pictures: Mark Cranitch.



“People in the UK thought I was mad to pack up and move to Australia”

Last year, Loubet was named in the world's top 50 chefs by The Culinary Institute of America and Sweden's EAT Foundation for his work promoting vegetables.

His mission continues here, without the big-city pressure of serving up to 3000 people a week. However, he will be calling on a few friends. Already locked in for guest appearances at the cooking school are culinary rock stars Raymond Blanc OBE (owner-chef at the two Michelin-starred Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Oxfordshire) and Brett Graham (of The Ledbury in London, and the highest ranked Australian chef in The World's 50 Best Restaurants). Loubet can't wait to get cracking.

Newly appointed ambassador of the 2018 Brisbane French Festival at South Bank in July, and the Efferescence champagne festival at Spicers Hidden Vale, southwest of Ipswich, in August, he will be showcasing Queensland produce.

“People in the UK thought I was mad to pack up and move to Australia again, but they told me I was crazy to leave London 17 years ago. They said, ‘Nobody succeeds if they keep coming and going’, but I proved them wrong then, and I will do it again.”

STARTING YOUNG

As a 10-year-old boy in southwest France, Loubet would sell bundles of leeks at the local market before school, earning himself a precious few francs. The fifth of seven children to Clement, a railway station manager, and Mauricette, he wanted to become either a farmer or a cook. (In the fullness of time, he has become both).

“We had an extensive veggie garden where I had to help, and we hardly had to buy anything, but only ate meat once or twice a week. My mother was a wonderful cook,” he says.

At age 14, Loubet enrolled in catering college at the Lycée Hotelier de Talence, in Bordeaux. A stint at the Hyatt Regency in Brussels followed, then French military service before the big move to London, in 1982, where he teamed up with chef Pierre Koffmann at La Tante Claire. Shortly after, he met Catherine Mougeol, newly arrived from Lyon and studying English at South Thames College. Their attraction was instant, and they married the next year, he at 22, she at 20.



UNFINISHED BUSINESS: (Clockwise from far left) Bruno Loubet with wife Catherine and dog Fergus at home at Willow Vale; Stephanie Alexander, Loubet and Maggie Beer in 2003; with Marilyn Domenech in 2008; preparing salt-dough-baked cauliflower and slow-roasted tomatoes with squid.

In 1985, with Loubet crowned Britain's Young Chef of the Year, daughter Laetitia was born. Laura followed in 1987 and, 11 years later, Chloe. Looking back, Loubet regrets not spending more time with his older children in their early years, but says London was a pressure cooker and chefs who didn't put in 100-plus hours a week didn't make it.

After joining Raymond Blanc at Manoir aux Quat'Saisons he became head chef at the Four Seasons, Inn on the Park, where he garnered a Michelin star. Then came Bistrot Bruno Loubet in Soho – the 1993 *Times* Restaurant of the Year – then L'Odeon in Regent St, where he won the same gong in 1996, and Isola in Knightsbridge. As champagne corks were popping on the new millennium, he was spent.

"I was exhausted physically and mentally, and to be honest, a lot of chefs around me had drinking and drug problems, because it was this era where everyone worked crazy hours, and everything was about the food and getting in the (restaurant) guides and getting bigger write-ups.

"Marco Pierre White was chasing his third Michelin star (which he got), and it was this crazy period where you gave 150 per cent every single day, and I'd done it for years and years and years. I didn't take drugs and I wasn't an alcoholic, but I started to feel – not depressed – but that if I stayed something bad would happen. It was too much, you know, so I realised it was time to change."

With his credentials, he could have gone anywhere. He considered New York (La Goulue on the Upper East Side) but his gut instinct – and an encounter with cook Stephanie Alexander a decade earlier – told him to choose Australia.

"When I was at the Four Seasons, Stephanie was sent by the Australian Government to cook for a week, and you know, for French people, Australia is very exotic, so while I was helping her I asked lots of questions, and I liked what I heard. Then she said to me, 'You know, Bruno, you should come to Australia; people will love you and you will love it'. This stuck in my mind."

Before committing to moving hemispheres, Loubet and Catherine came on holiday, eating out in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. "We went to e'cco (formerly in Fortitude Valley), and we felt Brisbane had the edge because at the time it was very much on the way up and we could see the potential, and we liked the weather, the schools and the safe environment for a family," he says.

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THE BIG MOVE

Months later, they were back, staying in a motel in Toowong with their three children. One day, Loubet passed a restaurant on Miskin St, and stopped to look inside. "The chef (Peter Roelfes) came out and asked if he could help me and later said he wanted to sell."

Bruno's Tables opened in March 2002. *The Courier-Mail* called the food inventive, confident and refined – and Loubet's handmade beetroot ravioli with sage and horseradish butter was as well received as his beef cheeks and boudin blanc. The restaurant won national and state accolades, and Loubet was named *The Courier-Mail* 2004 Chef of the Year.

When an offer presented to move to Noosa and live by the beach, Loubet closed Tables. Working in one of the smallest kitchens of his career, he lifted Berardo's to Australia's Best Regional Restaurant in 2005 (in *Gourmet Traveller* magazine) before being lured back to Brisbane in 2007 by restaurant royalty Francis and Marilyn Domenech.

"It was the perfect fit," recalls Marilyn, who opened Baguette in Ascot in 1976 (and sold it shortly after Francis's death in 2013). Bruno exuded a quiet authority, and you just knew you were in the hands of a master. His deep love of food and the craft of cooking showed in the thoughtful and intelligent way he approached his role."

It was here, at Baguette, that a visiting British journalist was able to solve what he said was a persistent puzzle in UK food circles.

"Whatever happened to Bruno Loubet?" wrote Tim Heald in *The Spectator* magazine. "The short answer is that he is still cooking up a storm but has, for the last few years, been doing so down under. Not in the smart restaurant

world of Sydney or Melbourne, nor even the less well known but still exciting culinary world of Adelaide or Hobart, but in Queensland, which is still associated, even by other Australians, very unfairly with steak and eggs, year-round barbies and perhaps, at a pinch, the Morton (sic) Bay Bug."

HOME AND BACK AGAIN

The down-to-earth Loubet saw Queensland differently, loving it so much that he and his family became Australian citizens, but in 2009 they returned to the UK.

"Catherine's grandmother (now 98) was about to go into a retirement home," he says, "and there were a lot of people dying and a lot of newborns – which usually happens when you reach around 50 – but we were not part of any of that."

"And on a professional level, I'd started to feel I had unfinished business, something more to do in the UK. We were always very upfront about our intention to come back to Australia, whether in two, five or, at the most, 10 years."

Even so, leaving England for the second time was bitter-sweet. Eldest daughter Laetitia had married a Scottish sales manager, Kieran McPate, and was settled in London with the couple's daughter Lily (twins Louis and Grace were born last month), and youngest child Chloe was enjoying cinematography studies at London South Bank University. Only Laura (who is expecting her first child with schoolteacher husband Ben Truscott), would be in Brisbane.

"It was difficult," says Loubet, "but we can visit often and Australia is home."

As for his peers in the UK, many remain baffled by the adventurous Frenchman.

"Before leaving this time, some chefs said to me, 'We thought you were crazy to return and open Bistrot Bruno, because you were from another generation and there were a few generations ahead of you, but we respect you because you had the balls to come back and you did it. And then, you reinvented yourself again and did something nobody else had done before in Grain Store'.

"Come to think of it," says Loubet, "I was doing tarte tatin of onion (instead of apple) 20 years ago and now it's the big thing in restaurants."

"I actually started a kind of movement with vegetables, and it's becoming bigger and bigger." ■