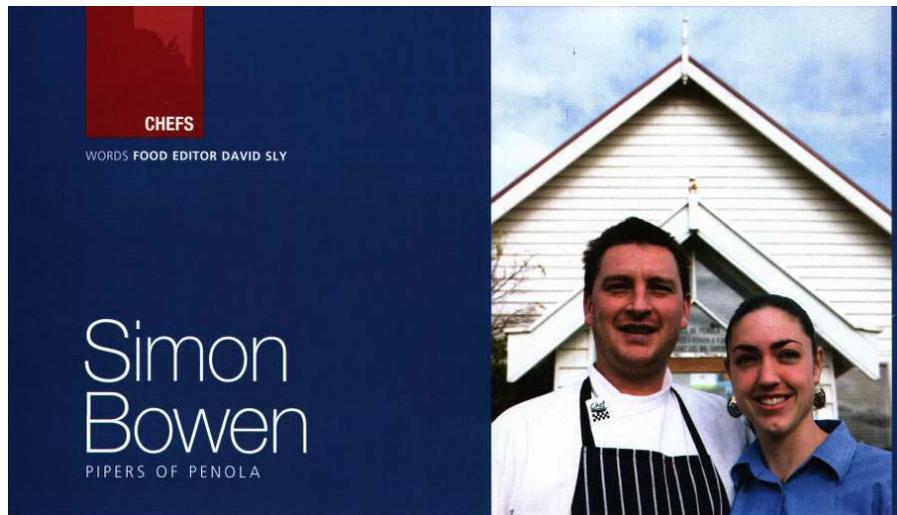




SA Life
July, 2009
Page: 72
General News
Region: Adelaide
Circulation: 12000
Type: Australian Magazines Lifestyle
Size: 840.82 sq.cms
Frequency: Monthly



HAVING WORKED WITH LEADING CHEFS ACROSS Australia and around the world, Simon Bowen took something of a risk by returning home to Coonawarra with his wife Erika to open their first restaurant. Taking over the lease of the handsome Pipers of Penola gave them the security of acquiring an established business, though there was no guarantee that their fine dining ambitions could be realised in a country town – even within a sophisticated wine region. “We realised immediately that we couldn’t just be a luxury item,” says Simon. “We definitely wanted to pursue fine dining or else all our years of training would have seemed to be a waste, but we still have a primary function of feeding hungry people. So we started gently, with nothing on the menu being overworked, keeping everything simple and clean.”

Now, three years after taking the plunge into restaurant ownership, the proof of the Bowens’ success is on the plate. Simon is drawing national acclaim for his finesse in marrying classical culinary technique with superb regional ingredients and well sourced produce, with prime examples being plump seared scallops in crayfish foam on truffled leek puree, cleverly crisped pork roulade ringed by crackling, and wagyu beef medallion smoked with local vine cuttings. Clientele growth at Pipers of Penola has been steady and business figures are sound, due largely to the chef being pragmatic about what he serves to customers.

“If we had attempted this seven years previously, I think we would have really struggled,” says Simon. “We actually went into this business a bit naive. I was entirely confident until the moment I had to sign on the dotted line, and then I started having doubts. That was when the lessons of my training kicked in.”

Simon – the son of Bowen Estate winery proprietors Doug and Joy Bowen – began his culinary journey by training with Stephanie Alexander in Melbourne, then cooked in the United States (where he met his American wife Erika) and Europe at Michelin star rated restaurants. After returning to Australia, the Bowens spent three years at the famed Lake House Restaurant in Daylesford, Victoria, where they learned from proprietor Alla Wolf-Tasker that persevering with absolute quality does result in customers travelling



to a remote destination for a premium dining experience.

“The body of knowledge you build up is crucial, especially through working with more than one great chef,” says Simon. “These mentors give you the sum of their experience, which provides you with something to fall back on once you’re out on your own. If you haven’t got that, you can’t predict the future, you can’t anticipate what lies ahead. It’s good to have a dream about running your own restaurant, but you’ve also got to realise that this is a business.”

Pragmatism has taught Simon and Erika to look beyond the kitchen to ensure the success of their restaurant. They have learned that what they must offer at Pipers of Penola is the complete dining experience – from the elegance of table settings and crisp service, to displaying some striking wood sculptures by local artist Guy Detot and elegant seasonal flower arrangements. “Customers take in the full experience, and sometimes it’s the strangest details that bring the flattering comments,” says Erika. “It’s worth the effort and the attention to detail. We don’t want a cafeteria feel to this place if we want to offer European fine dining service. You’ve got to do whatever it takes to reach the standard you want to achieve, and often that goes beyond just the food.”

There’s an aura of calm and focus as the Bowens prepare for nightly service – an unusual harmony between a married couple working within the pressure cooker of a restaurant environment. “Well, we met in a restaurant,” says Simon, alluding to when they both worked in Sonoma County in northern California. “I suppose we’re lucky because we don’t know anything else than this life, really. Hospitality really burns people if they don’t know what they are doing. Fortunately, we’ve got experience under our belts.”

Having started as a lean two person operation, Pipers of Penola now employs an apprentice in the kitchen, which makes Simon feel proud that he can begin to feed his accumulated knowledge and experience back into the hospitality industry. “I like the fact that we can mentor a young person and have something of value to give back to the region,” he says. “If you get the right training, your standards don’t slip; you carry them with you through the years. That’s why our restaurant is doing so well – our standards are set in stone.”



Pork three ways: roasted fillet, crispy skin belly and crisp rillettes

1 red cabbage, finely sliced
 2 star anise
 1 stick cinnamon
 1 cup port
 1½kg boneless pork belly
 1 pork fillet
 2 cups white wine
 Rice wine vinegar
 Mirin
 1 green mango, thinly shaved
 1 shallot, finely sliced
 1 tsp palm sugar
 1 tsp fish sauce
 1 bunch coriander
 1 tbsp roasted sesame seeds
 Mandarin juice



Overnight, marinate finely sliced red cabbage with star anise, cinnamon and enough port just to cover. The next day, slowly cook cabbage in the marinade until tender, seasoning with salt and pepper.

Trim pork belly into a square, keeping all the scraps. Place belly in a large roasting tray with white wine, cover and cook in 160C oven until a skewer can pass through the belly without resistance (about 2½ hours). Place a flat, heavy weight on top of belly and refrigerate until set. Before serving, cook salted belly skin side down in a non-stick oiled pan until skin pops and crackles, then place in oven until crisp and hot.

Blend belly offcuts until meat strands are all separate, then cook in a pan with some pork belly juice, rice wine vinegar and mirin. Flatten to slim logs on a tray and refrigerate. Immediately before serving, crumble logs and deep fry until golden.

Lightly brine pork loin in one part salt to 10 parts water solution for two hours, drain, then roast in 190C oven for 10 minutes before leaving meat to rest.

Combine shaved green mango with palm sugar, mandarin juice, fish sauce, shallot, roasted sesame seeds and coriander to form a salad.

To serve: Heat cabbage in a pan, then place on the centre of the plate. Arrange slices of fillet and belly on top, crowned by a spoonful of green mango salad, then crisp pork rillettes.