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TABLEWARE

SAWEEKEND NOVEMBER 11-12, 2017

**O**rdering plates for a fine dining restaurant in the '90s was a simple job with a simple formula: the bigger and whiter the better. But as the philosophy behind the food being served has changed drastically in the intervening decades, so has the way it is presented.

Chefs have become increasingly interested in working with local producers and ingredients to create a cuisine that reflects their environment as well as the changing seasons. For Damon Moon, "to have that sense of regionality and the providence of the ingredients, and then to serve it on a \$2 generic white plate is almost a contradiction in terms".

The son of renowned potter Milton Moon, A.M. Damon continues the family legacy as Creative Director of Ceramics at the boutique JamFactory studio. A thoughtful figure with a playful streak, he refers to his work as "bits of crockery" but there's no mistaking his passion for the craft.

"There's this great history of anthropomorphism in the language used to describe ceramics," he says excitedly from his office in the corner of the studio. "Pots have lips and mouths and bellies and feet, and when someone is eating their food from a plate or cradling a bowl in their hand, they have a very close relationship with that object. The relationship between food and tableware is the most intimate one there is."

And yet, while diners and critics venerate the art on the walls and architectural design of dining spaces, the quotidian nature of the tableware has continually relegated it to second class status. No matter how beautifully designed, the very functionality of plates, bowls and cups has prevented them from being appreciated in the same way.

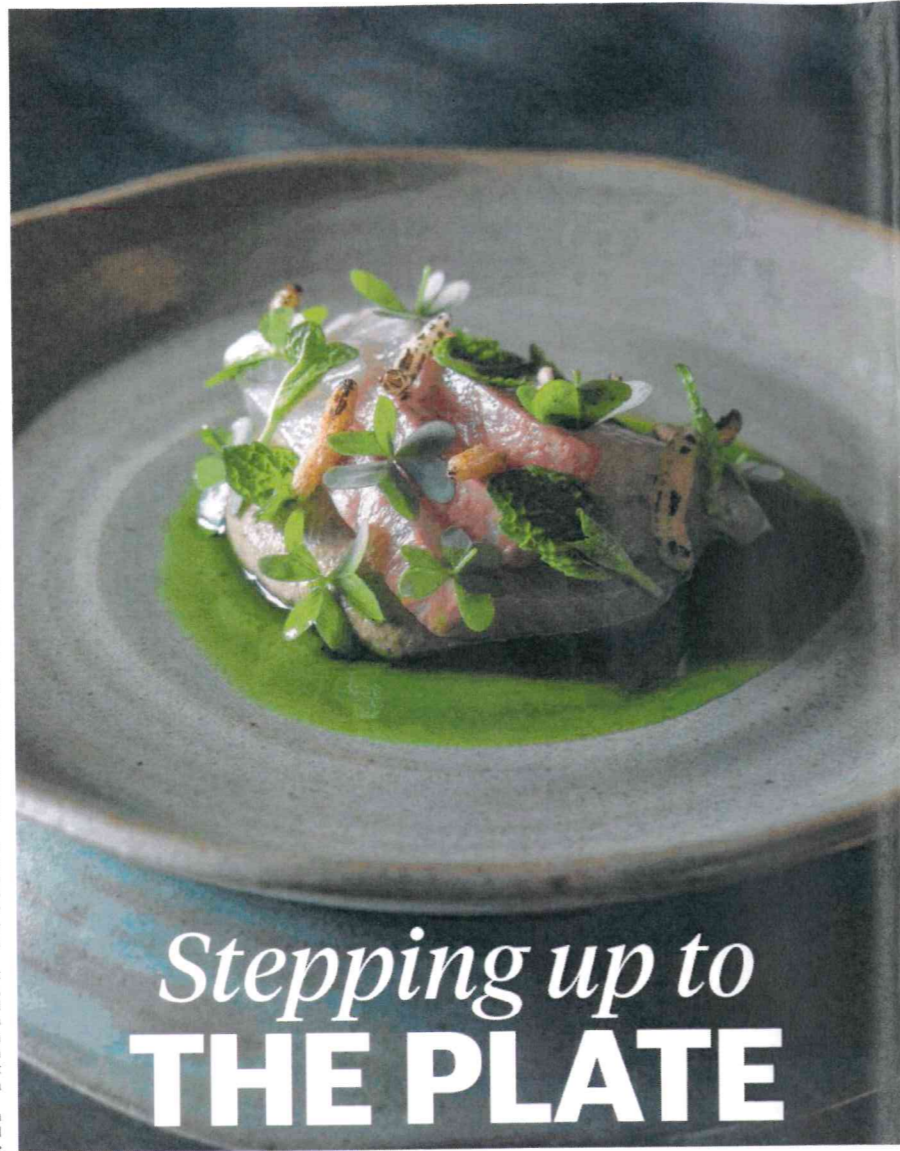
It's a state of affairs that is changing, albeit slowly. As the head chef at Hentley Farm, Lachlan Colwill sees diners "who are excited by the touch and feel of tableware - there's more emotion around it these days than there used to be". That gives him an incentive to put a greater amount of effort into sourcing unique "bits of crockery" with a story of their own.

In the past, he would create a new menu item and then scour the internet and hospitality suppliers to find an appropriate way to serve it, hoping that his competitors hadn't settled on the same product. Now, however, he prefers to work with local artisans to ensure that each item in the service has been custom-designed to suit his creations and the restaurant.

When Hentley Farm hosted the World's 50 Best Restaurants Academy Dinner earlier this year, Lachlan wanted to create a unique dining experience. So while he was developing the menu, he asked a young associate from JamFactory to visit the restaurant and create a set of accompanying tableware.

Ashlee Hopkins has been a potter for just two and a half years, but in that time she's developed a distinctive style of ceramics with rustic, earthy tones. Their simple elegance is the result of an excellent eye and a striking dedication to her craft. The young University of South Australia graduate's goofy sense of humour is accompanied by a cheeky and relentlessly cheerful demeanour, but once she steps into the studio it's all work.

When she accepts a large restaurant commission, everything else gets put on



# Stepping up to THE PLATE

Restaurant plates were once almost certain to be generic white. Now there's a shift to earthier colours and materials that better suit the dish

WORDS ALEXIS BUXTON-COLLINS

hold. "I think about it from before I wake up to that last second before I go to sleep," she says. "It just consumes my life."

Creating a new line of tableware is an arduous process. On that initial visit to Hentley Farm, she discussed the menu with Lachlan before examining the size and shapes of the existing tableware, as well as the décor and general atmosphere of the room in which it would be served.

The next step was creating prototypes to see how they would carry sauce and retain temperature, before finding the right glaze to match the tones of the restaurant. This meant adapting existing recipes with a variety of minerals and chemicals, and

seeing how they reacted to the heat of the kiln, before the laborious process of throwing each individual item by hand.

**A**shlee and Lachlan first sat down months before the dinner, and she was occupied with the process right up until the delivery, mere days beforehand. But the results are works of art, individually crafted pieces that are conceived specifically to highlight both the food and the venue.

A chef's job is not simply to cook food but to create an immersive experience that transports diners away from their everyday lives. Like the partnerships with local

producers, the vibrant, tactile creations of local ceramic artists help to carry the story beyond the table, and Lachlan can't imagine doing things any other way.

"I would never go back to purchasing bulk plates online, because you don't get the touch and feel, and you don't get a chance to have your say of what works. If I had the budget to do it, I would have Ashlee in a little side room next to the farm... before I started the process of talking about the dishes with the chefs, I would talk with her."

Though it has a long history in Japan, this collaboration of chef and ceramicist only started to gain wider popularity in Australia through Malcolm Greenwood's work with



Tetsuya's in Sydney. It's where Emma McCaskill encountered the practice, before leaving to become the first non-Japanese chef at the acclaimed Narisawa.

When she and partner Scott Huggins took over as head chefs at Magill Estate, the pair began working with Damon Moon almost from the moment they arrived. After commissioning a set of service items, they were so impressed that they brought their entire staff to the studio to see how it was produced, from conception to the dining table. For her next birthday, Scott, who also spent time working as a chef in Japan, bought Emma a pottery course at the JamFactory. For a few hours each Sunday over eight weeks, she learnt the basics of the craft, an experience that was both immensely rewarding and painfully eye-opening.

"It's not simple at all - there's so much technique. Even just the beginning part where you try to centre the clay on the wheel, it's so bloody hard! I spent an hour trying to centre it and it just kept flinging off and hitting the wall," she laughs at the memory. "I just think it was really good to realise how difficult it was."

"I also understood the time frame more, because you have to make the shape and then it has to dry out for sometimes two weeks - there are so many processes, and then you have to glaze it and dry it out and then fire it... it's such a long process."

Despite this, the pieces that Damon produced were undoubtedly worth the wait. After sourcing local clay from Willunga, Damon visited the restaurant to collect ash that the wagyu beef had been cooked on, which he added to the clay. Charcoal from the same source made its way into glazes and the result was a plate that did more than just hold the food. It told the story of the artist who created it, the chefs who collaborated on it and the kitchen in which it was prepared.

When Emma left Magill Estate to take over The Pot earlier this year, there was never any question of ordering her tableware through a wholesaler.

"I came here and it was a little generic and it made me realise how important it was for the food, because the perception of it can affect the flavours and the feel of the room. It takes so long to make and I've only been here for a short time, so we're still in the beginning process of stocking up at the restaurant but I've tried to get rid of as much generic tableware as I can. I can't stress enough how much of a difference it makes having the right plates and crockery."

As well as engaging several emerging potters, she'll continue to collaborate with Damon, who is generous in his praise of both Emma and Scott. As an artist, working with chefs and restaurateurs who have an



"These plates... weren't made to be put on plinths for people to stare at."



Main picture: Kingfish, spring onion and sorrel created by Hentley Farm executive chef Lachlan Colwill, above left, and served on tableware created by Ashlee Hopkins, above right (Picture: Sven Kovac). A range of plates used at Magill Estate (Picture: Andre Castelucci), Emma McCaskill is slowly changing the tableware at The Pot, above centre (Picture: Ryan Norek)

## KathyLette

### Recipes for success for a non-domestic goddess



I can't cook. I use my smoke alarm, as a timer. The last time I baked was when I fell asleep on a sun-bed. Truly, you're looking at a woman who burns water. You think I'm joking. But here's ultimate proof of my gastronomic ignorance - I once went to the corner store and asked for a "pinch of nutmeg" and a "clove of crushed garlic". Tragically, but true.

Until recently I thought "aspic" was some posh ski resort in the Colorado mountains and that "blancmange" was the highest point in the Swiss alps. And I'm pretty sure "consomme" is the ecstatic cry of Brigitte and Emmanuel Macron on their wedding night, yes?

In other words, the kitchen is not my natural habitat. Put it this way - my favourite recipe is Domestic Goddess, roasted slowly on a spit. When friends ask why I don't ever cook, I reply it's just because I don't want to go down for manslaughter.

When I first got married I did make an effort but recipes proved as foreign to me as Sanskrit. Planning my first dinner party I flicked through cookbooks becoming more and more fraught. What the hell is a truffle slicer? Or a Mexican tortilla press? Aren't "capers" those things you get up to in your youth? And what the hell is a braise? "Braise yourself darling," sounds like Australian foreplay.

"Salmon Wellington" looked like the easiest option. I dutifully rolled out the pastry sheet on to a lightly floured surface and placed the fillets in the middle. How easy was this, I gloated.

Over-confident at my new-found culinary prowess, I then popped over to my neighbour's garden to nick some herbs. (Fresh herbs! Move over Nigelia Lawson. A TV cooking show clearly beckoned!) I then returned to find the cat stripping the last of the salmon off the pastry.

Oh no! What now? With guests imminent, a rummage through the freezer produced nothing but a packet of themed fish fingers in the shape of Disney characters. Dumping them into a Pyrex dish I nuked the whole lot to death in the microwave before serving them up in a haemorrhage of ketchup. It was more quiz-ine than cuisine, as diners tried to guess what marginally aquatic foodstuff had been configured into comic characters and shoved under their noses in a pool of blood. The cacophony of complaints from my dinner party guests gave new meaning to "Whining and Dining".

My solution was to pour more and more wine - meaning that pretty soon we were all getting on like a stove on fire. Except it was. The stove, I mean. I'd left a tea towel too near the hob... Which meant that a moment later we were all covered in a duvet of fire extinguisher foam.

If you can't stand the heat... get out of the kitchen and order takeaway. As we nosed down on Thai curry in the living room half an hour later, it was then I concocted my simple recipe on how NOT to be a "Domestic Goddess".

- 1) Always remember that "home cooking" is just that place where a bloke thinks his wife is.
- 2) Never fuss about culinary failures. If your gravy goes lumpy, you won't be arrested for carrying a congealed weapon.
- 3) If food's burnt, simply call it "Cajun". (Just pretend there's a new culinary trend - Cordon Noir.)
- 4) Concoct the right Human Menu - food for thought is the most important ingredient. After all, what comes out of a person's mouth is much more important than what goes in. (Many a true word is spoken ingested.)

And, my final tip, always remember that not being able to cook is a feminist gesture.

What I'm craving is a recipe for change. Emmeline Pankhurst did not tie herself to the railings so that women would be tethered by a tea towel to the kitchen sink. If females stop dicing and slicing, then perhaps men will learn to be at home on the range. Is there anything more sexy than a man in a cooking apron?

The way to a woman's heart is through her stomach. That is NOT aiming too high. Men are always asking women really want in bed? Well, let me tell you - breakfast.

You see girls? When you wish upon a Michelin Star, dreams really can come true.

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Have you had a cooking disaster? Share your stories at saweekend@adv.newsfile.com.au. The best letter wins a double pass to Senior Moments, at Dunstan Playhouse on February 6 at 6.30pm. Please include your full name and address.

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