

# CATCH OF THE DAY

Executive Chef Andrew McConnell drew inspiration from his coastal surrounds while preparing his feast for Weekends of Wonderment at qualia's Pebble Beach restaurant. By Carla Grossetti.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EARL CARTER

When acclaimed Melbourne chef Andrew McConnell visited the Whitsundays earlier this year he found himself stranded on a deserted island. Thankfully, the escapade was conceptualised by qualia as a castaway adventure more in line with the James Bond franchise rather than the Bear Grylls brand. McConnell and his partner Jo, were dropped off by speedboat on Henning Island, at the tail end of his cameo as guest chef at the Weekends of Wonderment event at qualia in May this year. While on the island, McConnell says he found himself enjoying the unfamiliar sensation of having absolutely nothing to do. "Being dropped off with my partner Jo on a deserted island where we didn't see another soul for the entire afternoon was not on my bucket list... but it should have been," says the 46-year-old, who, as Executive Chef of five Melbourne eateries, works an average of 60 hours a week. "There were rock oysters everywhere, we saw a massive turtle swimming past us and we had a picnic on our own private beach. It truly was an amazing experience," says McConnell, whose award-winning restaurants include Cumulus Inc., Cutler & Co. and Supernormal. McConnell says qualia orchestrated an idyllic afternoon setting that included a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, a gourmet picnic hamper, striped sun-loungers and a beach umbrella. Although he was working while in the Whitsundays, he says

he found exploring the string of islands a real pleasure.

"I had never been to Hamilton Island and I was blown away by the sheer beauty of the Whitsundays, the purity of the air, the water quality and the stunning mountains that frame the island and the vista," he says.

Although whispers of McConnell's greatness follow him around Melbourne, the modest chef prefers to keep a low profile. "I prefer to fly under the radar a bit and spend my time in my restaurants with my chefs and customers," he says.

The intimate Weekends of Wonderment getaways are events that appeal 'to those with a love affair of all things luxurious and artisanal'. As part of the weekend activities, McConnell joined marine biologist Matt Vickers and 21 guests for an exclusive hands-on crabbing expedition. McConnell describes the experience as one of the highlights of his career.

"In Melbourne, the crabs I order for my restaurants arrive in a polystyrene box. This was the first time I'd ever been crabbing, so to go out on the water with Matt the crab whisperer was really special.

"I learnt how to pick a good crab, about the fishery's sustainable practices, how to pull up a mud crab from a sustainable crab pot and it gave me a greater appreciation of the ingredient," he says.

McConnell says a highlight of the event was being able to cook and plate up the mud crabs

Andrew McConnell.



Heirloom tomato salad, fresh burrata, Luna Rosa Rosé 2015.

Soft meringue, sheep's milk yoghurt, apple and shiso granita, Frogmore Creek Iced Riesling 2013.



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within hours of plucking them from the sea. His menu at qualia's Pebble Beach restaurant included: canapés of devilled crab; an heirloom tomato salad draped with fresh burrata; forbidden rice, picked crab and nettle; Shiro kin wagyu sirloin with pepper sauce and grilled onions; and a salad of broccoli, egg and bonito. Sweet toothers were also reeled in with soft meringue, sheep's milk yoghurt, apple and shiso granita.

For breakfast the next day, McConnell cooked shakshouka poached egg, feta, spinach and dukkah - a cult dish that has been on the menu at Cumulus Inc. for seven years and would “start a riot if it were removed”.

While McConnell trained in Europe and is well-versed in high-end techniques, he also spent a lot of time travelling in Asia and says his style is a distillation of all these influences.

“The flavours in Japan and China have really influenced me, as did the precision and restraint evident with both cuisines. I enjoy the regional differences in Japanese and Chinese cuisine as well as the techniques they use which are honest to the origin of the flavours,” he says.

As for what inspired McConnell during Weekends of Wonderment, he says it was being in an exciting new environment, using great local products and being able to get to know the 20 or so guests who gathered to enjoy his cooking.

“Watching the sun set between two islands while cooking dinner for an intimate group on a long table overlooking the sea was so far removed from my kitchens in Flinders Lane or Gertrude Street in Melbourne. I really had to pinch myself... it was magic,” says McConnell. “It felt intimate and it felt worldly and it was as much about connecting with the food we eat as it was connecting with each other.”

Andrew McConnell and assistant John Paul Twomey.



Andrew McConnell preparing.



Shiro kin wagyu sirloin, pepper sauce, slow roast onions, Cullen 'Diana Madeline' Cabernet Merlot 2012.



PHOTOGRAPHY: KARA ROSEN LUND.