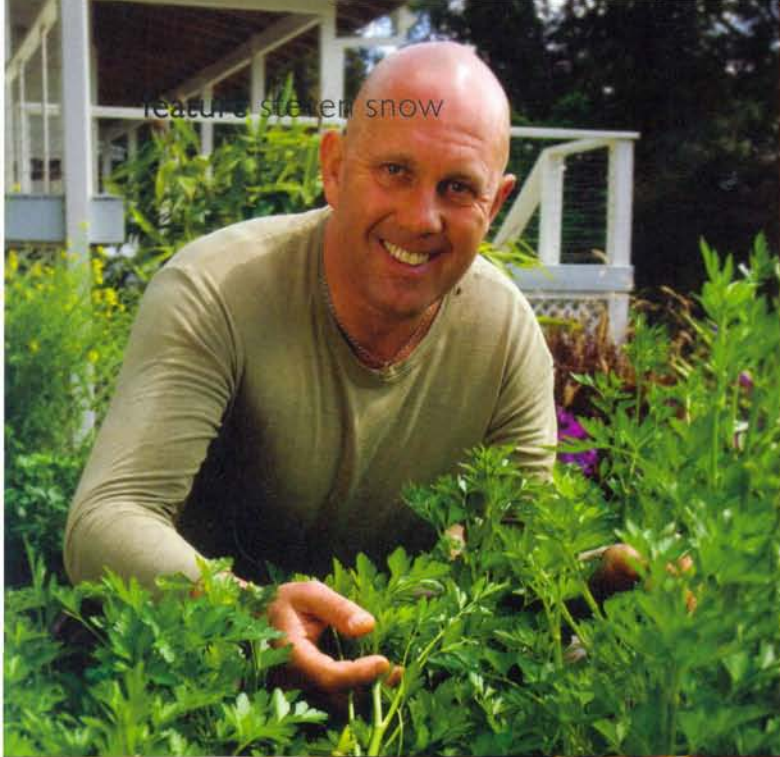
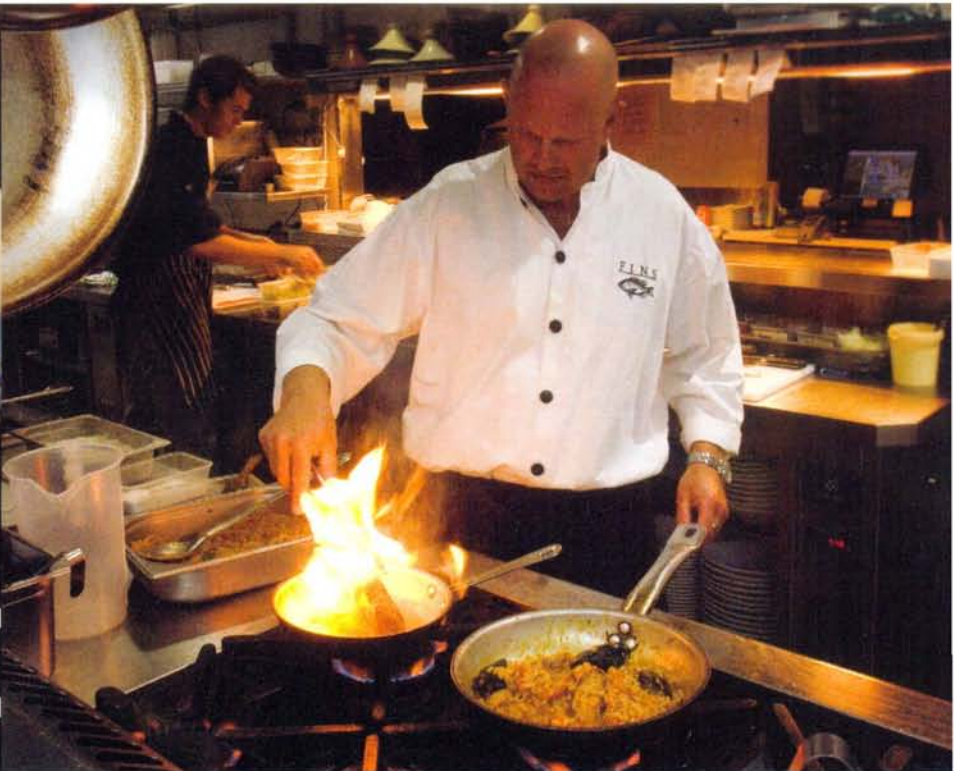
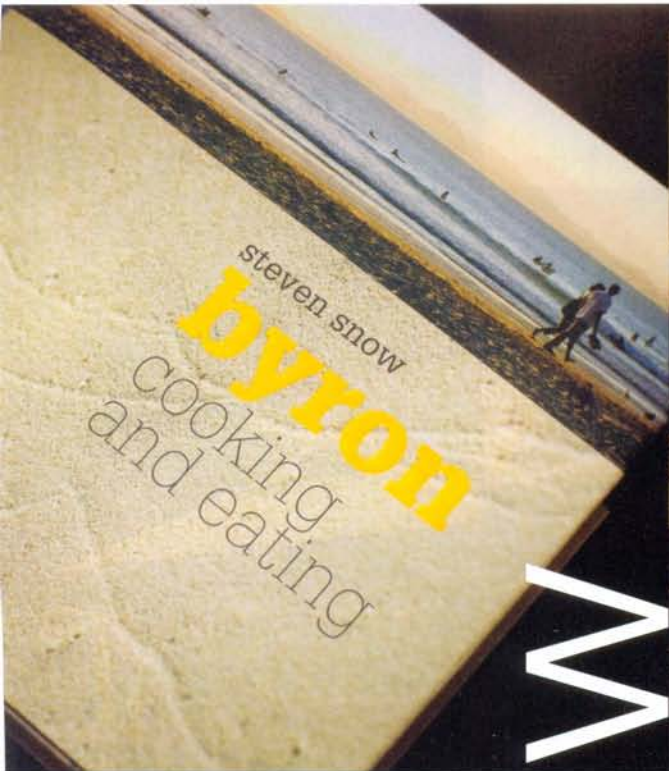


featuring steven snow





steven snow

Story: Melissa Ellis
Photos: Bob Weeks

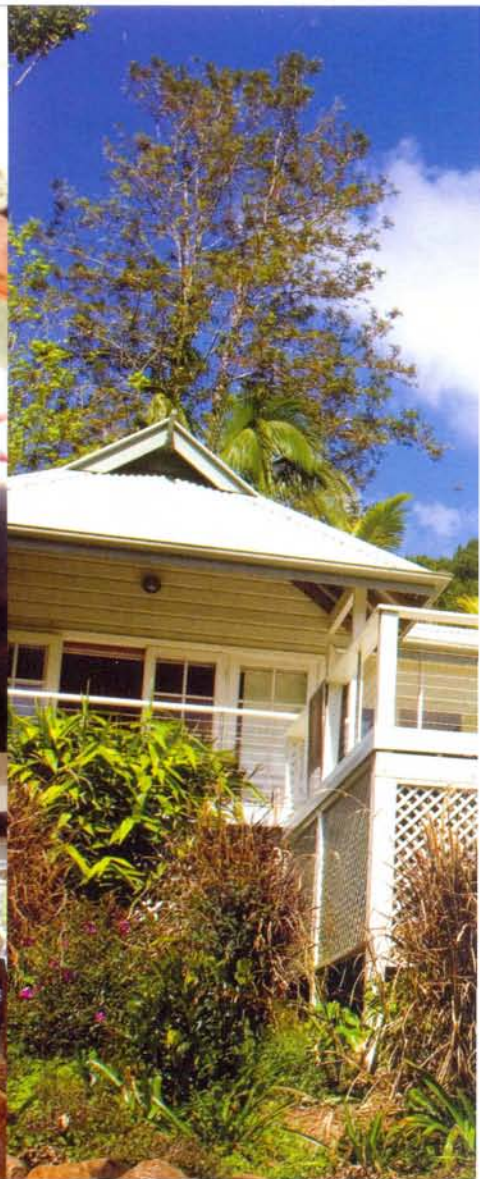
With renowned chef Steven Snow currently celebrating the launch of his first book, *Coast Living* visited him at home to chat about 'Byron Cooking and Eating,' his Possum Creek lifestyle and global culinary travels.

It's a quality many great chefs seem to possess, a flamboyant passion that seemingly flows from their hands into their culinary creations, a quality that can make for riveting television or in this case, a new lifestyle-inspired cookbook.

Perhaps it's the collaborative forces of heat and time pressure in the kitchen, or maybe it's the tough training ground where they learn to wield those finely-sharpened knives, but chefs can also be renowned for their frankness (I'm sure some notable examples come to mind).

While he may not have a TV show or a range of cookware bearing his signature, Fins restaurant owner Steven Snow does share both the candour and obsession for seasonal produce that are hallmarks of his global chef compatriots.

feature steven snow



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Steven and his dog Bella, Steven and Morgan in their living room, Steven inspects his fruit trees.

He is absolutely besotted with fresh food, and those fishy 'fruits de mer' in particular. It's the reason Steven's early mornings are often spent talking with north coast trawler captains, instead of hunting Byron's best sunrise waves with his surfboard in tow.

It's fair to say that Steven also enjoys a degree of celebrity within Australian culinary circles, both on a personal and professional level. He's the owner of a well-known restaurant, an international guest chef and cooking teacher, and an ambassador of Australian food.

On a personal front Steven names some of the country's best known chefs as his friends, people like 'Tets' (Tetsuya Wakuda) and Rockpool's, Neil Perry – and he's also on a first-name basis with many respected food writers, thanks to his work as a chef and a past role as a columnist.

Steven's latest literary achievement is his first book title, 'Byron Cooking and Eating' which was launched by Murdoch Books in September.

Sure to secure him a place on coffee tables

as well as kitchen counters – thanks to stunning photography by Brett Boardman – the book combines Steven's recipes, lifestyle and culinary inspiration within its sizeable pages.

Chatting about the book and his life in general, on the verandah of his Byron hinterland home, Steven's history seems richer than the ingredients in one of his signature Mauritian sambals.

It seems no surprise that his best yarns are linked with food adventures and that his comments keep returning to food with the precision of a honing beacon.

Steven's life and his food are inextricably entwined, to the point where many of his travels have seen themselves play out in his globally-inspired dishes.

Even his home is included in the context of the new book, with a whole chapter titled: 'blissed out on the verandah – eating at home in Possum Creek.'

With Brett Boardman taking photos over multiple north coast visits, Steven is now happy

to demonstrate that the food and lifestyle portrayed in the book are authentic. He points out the section on his verandah where his family gathers for meals and the native bunya trees in a nearby paddock.

"This is Possum Creek, like we're doing now," Steven said surveying the property. "That was kind of the hardest thing for me to write about, because Possum Creek's my retreat..." he added.

In deference to the book's combined lifestyle and food focus, it even includes an image of Steven upside down on his bald pate – an impressive yoga move.

"I do yoga as part of my daily routine, I'm Ok at it but I have no interest nor the ability to pursue it at a higher level, it's more part of the routine," he said.

While yoga helps Steven relax, he saves his passion for his food. And while Possum Creek is a world away from his bustling commercial kitchen, there is still a discernible link between the Byron hinterland farm and Steven's latest



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The house at Possum Creek, one of Steven's pets, 'Puss', a page from Steven's new book, 'Byron Cooking and Eating'.

Fins restaurant (the third instalment) which opened in September 2007 at Salt village.

"I've got all my fruit trees and heaps of things for the restaurant so it gives me almost an unfair advantage, because when people are eating at Fins the lemons have been preserved from what I learnt in Morocco and they've come from my farm here. They're not just organic, they're feral – they've never had anything on them, ever," he said.

Confessing that he's often foggy when recalling time frames and dates, Steven said he's had the 10-acre property for about 17 years. Originally living at nearby Federal after moving north from Sydney, Steven and then wife Margarida built the home to raise their children, Mitchell and Samuel.

Their sons may now have grown, but they still visit their dad at the expansive timber home. There's also a room for when six-year-old Mia visits, Steven's daughter from a later relationship.

Large and welcoming but not pretentious, the

home's walls are now decorated with vibrant artworks created by Steven's partner Morgan, who is also the manager of Fins.

"I've got all my fruit trees and heaps of things for the restaurant so it gives me almost an unfair advantage, because when people are eating at Fins the lemons have been preserved from what I learnt in Morocco and they've come from my farm here."

"We actually have fun, which is quite surprising," Steven said dryly. "We work together, live together, I don't know if there's something strange about Morgan because we don't fight. I'm not going to take the credit for it," he added smiling.

The home at Possum Creek sits amongst a beautiful local landscape. There are regular koala and possum sightings, galah 'partners'

who call the farm home and the occasional sun-bathing python – and that's just some of the 'wild' creatures.

When Steven's out gathering those 'feral' lemons or organic herbs, his dog Bella is sure to be with him, while the family cat watches on from the courtyard. Then there's Rio, a horse with a penchant for carrots.

While the dog is undeniably Steven's companion, the cat and horse are long-time family pets he still shares the property with. The fact Steven's allergic to 'Puss' doesn't stop him spoiling the feline with fishy morsels from the kitchen. He's not a horse rider either, with Rio now acting as a 'lawn mower' in a picturesque creek-side paddock.

Perhaps Steven could have learned to horse ride, had his family stayed in the Byron area, but he ended up riding surfboards instead, when the Snow clan moved to Southport and then Caringbah in Sydney's south.

The son of a builder and primary school teacher, Steven would go to football or soccer

feature steven snow



practice, then head home to make a cake or perhaps a tuna curry casserole with layers of rice and cheese.

"(It's) the sort of thing that I'd like now because it would remind me of childhood, but it's all wrong," Steven says laughing about his youthful kitchen creation.

Like so many youngsters in the Cronulla area, he spent teenage years surfing local waves and enjoying beachside barbecues with his mates.

"We'd do all those things and go surfing and have a great time," Steven said before adding, "And now even with this book there's certainly a focus on the ocean - we've got recipes from Morocco, Mauritius, Portugal, Thailand and France."

He must be a good surfer then?

"I used to be, now I'm a has-been," Steven answers so bluntly that I remark about his harshness.

"Not really, it's true," he asserts. "At one stage I'd be surfing huge waves at Jeffrey's Bay in South Africa and Tamarin Bay in Mauritius. I surfed at Puerto Escondido in Mexico about a month ago now and there were guys breaking boards and it was an extreme wave. If it's bigger it's better for me in a way, particularly if there's a rip or a current to help me paddle out, as I can't paddle like I used to.

"The skill does diminish over time, you've got to surf often, and I've got so much happening with business and writing things and family, that the waves have to be really good, on a day that I don't have to race somewhere - which is rare," he admitted.

Steven's penchant for frankness may have proved even more intriguing had he completed a university course in commerce/law, but his attendance slipped and he eventually bowed out.

A business degree met with greater success, and lead to a trainee product manager role in the food industry, with good wages and career prospects for the future. At least they would have been, if he hadn't been both bored and a tad outspoken.

Admitting he needs to have his own business so he doesn't 'get 'sacked,' Steven said his passion leads to great results when properly channelled - with both Fins and the new book two such examples.

But back in his 20s, Steven had no idea that a decision to continue his fledgling chef work, while on a world surfing safari, would have such

an impact on his future.

With some solid kitchen training at a Sydney restaurant behind him, Steven headed to a variety of global locations. He remains proud of his chef training, having learned the technical aspects from hands-on kitchen experience, at locations as diverse as South Africa, France and Mauritius.

Here, Steven developed an addiction to the road-side octopus sambal he describes as: "So hot with chilli it was ridiculous." The fire might have been toned down for the Aussie palate, but Fins still serves an authentic Mauritian sambal that's a re-invented 'legacy' of that leg of the trip.

"Then Madame and Monsieur would say: 'Ask the kangaroo to cook our fish can you?'"

One of his later stops, Portugal, became noteworthy for another reason - it was where Steven met Margarida, whom he later married.

And like so many of the other destinations, the trip here was also focussed on surfing and local food.

"When I was in Portugal we used to go down to the trawlers and take our plastic bag and they'd fill it with sardines," he said of trips with his friends. "There was a place we found that had bread made out of a wood-fired oven that was just astonishing... We'd char-grill the sardines and put them in the bread and of an evening have one of those five litre things of red wine from Portugal," he said.

While he would later return to Portugal and marry Margarida, Steven had one more stop in mind on the first trip, the Holy cooking Grail of France.

Having heard about a good restaurant in the south, near another surfing break, he initially secured a job as a kitchen hand.

Quickly elevated from lettuce-washer to sous chef, Steven's stellar kitchen promotion resulted from a seafood dish he made the restaurants' owners.

"Then Madame and Monsieur would say: 'Ask the kangaroo to cook our fish can you?'" Steven said of the regular request.

While living in a ripped tent and working punishing hours took their toll, Steven said

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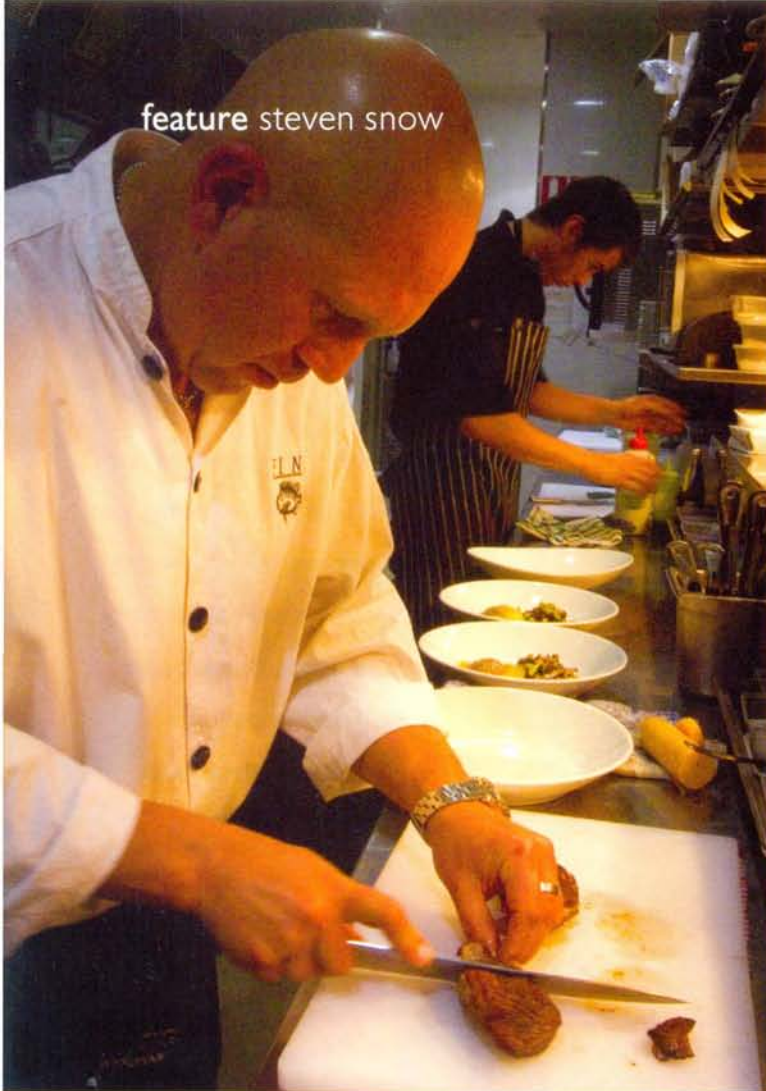
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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: One of Morgan's paintings adorns a living room wall. Some native Bunya nuts from the property. Morgan and Steven on the verandah. Steven offers Rio some of his favourite treats.



ABOVE: Steven in the kitchen at Fins at Salt Village

the steep learning curve was worth it. His promotion to second-in-charge saw him greatly advance his cooking skills, but there was trouble looming.

According to Steven's account, it wasn't long before the head chef's daily request for an arm wrestle (he was also a weightlifter) took on a more serious tone, despite the fact Steven wasn't interested.

"We ended up coming to blows and I ended up throwing a pie in his face, there was all sorts of action in that restaurant," he said.

With Steven contemplating an early return to Portugal, he said the restaurant's owners asked him to stay and work on the restaurant's fishing boat instead, further advancing his seafood knowledge.

This education, combined with eating authentic dishes from continents like South America and Africa, has given him a diverse perspective on food.

"I learnt a lot off old people, grandmas, grandpas – heaps," Steven said. "They're very smart and they're great cooks and they have all sorts of angles on preserving and using their local produce, it's just amazing.

"I learnt the different techniques, flavours and ideas – now I combine that with what I consider to be the best produce I've seen in the world, right here on the north coast, to create something that is interesting and local, yet with its soul intact."

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After Steven and new wife Margarida returned to Australia, a chance meeting lead to him being offered a kitchen at the rear of the Rose Bay Hotel, with Steven naming the restaurant, 'La Brassiere.'

Steven said a food review saw a sharp upturn in dining numbers, but that didn't quell

his desire to leave Sydney. "I quit because I wanted to come back here which is where we (his family) all started out, and I was so over Sydney," he said.

Working first at Byron, then at Brunswick Heads, Steven saw the original Fins up for sale, and became intrigued about the location and a menu with a seafood focus.

After buying the restaurant, he focussed on creating a seafood menu inspired by his travels, using local produce.

"...I'd buy octopus, squid, in fact all the things that I loved from Europe. They'd say: 'What do you want this s... for mate, this is bait!' The only other guy bidding against me was from the bait shop. I was cooking octopus the Portugese way, and people loved it," he added.

Again, Steven credits Sydney media food reviews for putting Fins at Brunswick on the foodie map, but he also remembers that restaurant for its ambience.

"We'd have people complaining that there was a snake near them because we had a resident python that would crawl through, and so we'd moved them to a less snake-infested area of the restaurant," Steven said smiling.



ABOVE: The tasty looking Soft Shell Crab.

While both business and the restaurant's award tally were fabulous, the RTA eventually reclaimed the site for the Pacific Highway upgrade and Steven had to move locations.

Fins next resting place was at Byron's iconic Beach Hotel during the ownership period of John Cornell and Delvene Delaney, whom Steven still speaks of fondly.

In Byron, things stepped up a notch with a casual yet sophisticated setting and a swag of food awards, including a national Restaurant and Catering award for 'Best Seafood Restaurant Australia, Specialty Produce.'

The Byron restaurant continued to grow in reputation and regularly receive two Chef's Hats in the Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide, but the chance to design his first restaurant from scratch saw Steven move Fins to Kingscliff last year.

If the Saturday night I visited was anything to go by, the move to Salt Village has been positive, with a packed house and customers waiting for a table. With a separate bar area serving tapas, freshly-cooked takeaways and Fins signature flavours for in-house dining, it appears Steven's Midas touch continues.

"Salt is the best restaurant I've ever run, instead of having to fit into certain parameters it's my best dining ideas. I've got a tapas bar, great staff - a full Zen attitude pervades the place. However, there's a kitchen, so there's lots of theatre and a lot of action, but it's a very cool place to work," Steven said.

With a major airport nearby, Steven continues to travel, whether it's for cooking-school appointments at Sydney's, Accoutrement or guest chef bookings in France.

That's just as well, because with a printed intention in Byron Cooking and Eating to "give away as many secrets and impart as much knowledge as I can..." he may need to keep finding fresh inspiration for dishes.

"It's incumbent upon me then to come up with something else or something new," he said of sharing his recipes, "I'm happy about that, I like that," Steven added.

With his life's work focussed on food so far, it's certainly not hard to believe him.

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