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She's back!

How pizza queen Rita Macali survived a brain tumour ... and opened the hottest restaurant of 2010

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THE
FOOD
ISSUE



“EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED TO ME HAS MADE ME STRONGER. I CAN WALK, TALK, I CAN COOK. IT KEEPS ME HAPPY.”

Photography James Geer



Pizza pioneer Rita Macali survived a brain tumour and returned to open a brilliant new restaurant, Supermaxi.

By Dani Valent

“Sometimes I cry when it looks too beautiful,” says Rita Macali, shimmering in the heat haze of the pizza oven at Supermaxi, the restaurant she owns in North Fitzroy. It’s Friday night. The place is pumping. She’s talking about pizza, thin-crust pizza that, every now and then, moves her to tears. She pulls one from the oven after its two-minute blast at 400 degrees: the tableau of prosciutto, mozzarella and basil is steaming, fragrant, picturesque. Macali regards it like a mother duck about to nudge one of her fledglings into a rushing stream, invested but ruthless. She drizzles it with olive oil – the final caress – and sends it away. A few minutes later, she sneaks to the waiter’s side of the servery and, trusting and hopeful, leans into the roar of the dining room. “I just want to see if everyone’s happy.”

Macali, 41, doesn’t rabbit on about food like a lot of chefs do – the words don’t come, there’s not much strategy except, perhaps, less is more.

“How do I know what’s right? I don’t know,” she says. “I find it very hard to talk about cooking.” Even so, she’s walked the talk into Melbourne’s “it” restaurants since the mid-1990s: the Kent Hotel (our first gastropub), est est est and Luxe (trailblazing next-gen fine diners) and Ladro (the place where pizza morphed from takeaway standby into an icon worth arguing over). Along the way, she’s developed her trademark Italian food with a Melbourne twist. “Rita has a simple but beautiful approach to produce, a natural affinity with food,” says chef Karen Martini, who worked closely with Macali for seven years. “Some people train for years and they still don’t get it but that adoration of food is just part of her.” And, says former friend and Ladro owner Sean Kierce, “Rita cooks beautifully well – she’s got the gift of making a simple dish taste better than a dish that’s more complicated.”

In the Supermaxi kitchen, her feel is obvious. She usually works with



the dough, taking plump, risen balls from shallow crates and turning them one at a time into stretched, supple discs, ready for topping and baking. "I get very jealous when I see other people rolling," she says, looking around the large kitchen at her five other cooks. They're on pans, salad, prep, while she slaps the dough from arm to arm, turning it from ball to oval, rubs it with flour, shows it the rolling pin, then picks it back up, flicking it from hand to hand as she walks around in her sneakers, pacing and stretching. "I want it thin, even, I don't want it round, I'm allergic to round," she says, jeans liberally dusted with flour, hair dragged back in a ponytail. Sometimes she tops the dough as well, ladling passata and smoothing it to a layer of rippled red, ripping mozzarella and dabbing it down, dotting a basil leaf here, here and there. It's a mix of precision and intuition. Each ball of dough weighs 230 grams, the digital

read-out on the oven is starkly emotionless but the pizza itself is eye, hand, feel. The night proceeds with calm efficiency. There is laughter, easy banter ("pull your arse in Rita", "we need Operation Bocconcini, Jimmy"), a quick check of the footy score, even the occasional "thank you". But the biggest serve of gratitude suffuses Macali herself: she's here, she's healthy, she's alive.

Four years ago, in October 2006, Macali was diagnosed with a brain tumour, just three months after she and her partner, Giovanni Patane, welcomed their child, Liliana, into the world. The following year, healing but weak and shaken, Macali busted with her partners at Ladro, the Fitzroy restaurant that spurred Melbourne's new-wave pizza craze. In mid-2008, the split was formalised. Macali sold her half of the business to Sean Kierce and Ingrid Langtry, the couple she'd →

Rita Macali making pasta in her kitchen at Supermaxi. "I get very jealous when I see other people rolling."

opened Ladro with in 2003. That done, she succumbed to anxiety and barely left the house for a year. "I don't want this to be a sad story because I'm fine," she says. "I'm lucky. I'm better for it." But it wasn't fine at the time.

Macali's career, like that of many chefs, is a story of intense bouts of work followed by burn-out and quiet periods of regrouping. She started hard, as a skinny 17-year-old at Lygon Street pasta joint La Spaghetтата, where she showed the blokes she could do anything, including lifting heavy sauce pots, washing out bins, gunning a 70-hour week. "I was passionate, driven, nothing else mattered," she says. After a year, she continued her apprenticeship under Guy Grossi, who introduced her to more sophisticated Italian food, "porcini mushrooms, balsamic vinegar, things I'd never really seen before". Grossi saw something in her. "When you see that fire in a young chef, you know she has something special," he says. From 1989, Macali continued her apprenticeship at three-hat Tansy's, a proving ground for many of Melbourne's prominent chefs, including Andrew and Matt McConnell, Philippa Sibley and Karen Martini.

The shouting and intensity in the kitchen bordered on abusive. Apprentices Macali and Martini had a task list that always seemed endless: picking herbs, making terrines, rillettes, ice-creams, bavaresis, slicing bread, boning hares. "We learnt heaps under extreme pressure. It was bonding," says Martini. Macali kept her head down, soaking up as much contemporary French cuisine as she could. "I did what I was told to do, absorbed the food, the emotions, took it all in, but it was really draining," she says. After she qualified as a chef, Macali took her first long break, heading to Italy for nine months to spend time with her parents' families in Carpineto Romano, a small mountain town south of Rome. "I was exhausted. I picked olives and grapes, helped my aunt make her prosciuttos for the year."

Back in Melbourne in 1992, a re-energised Macali joined her pal Martini at Haskins Hotel in North Fitzroy as co-head chef. The two women, in their early 20s, had a blast spending the owner's money and coming up with smart but relaxed dishes such as salmon wrapped in puff pastry with a love heart on top. "You do that sort of stuff when you're young," laughs Macali. The restaurant was quiet to begin with. "We'd only have three booked so we'd sit down and eat the beautiful terrines and desserts we'd made," says Martini. "We actually put on a lot of weight." In 1993, Gerald Diffey lured them to the newly renovated Kent Hotel where the wood-fired oven, open kitchen and gutsy, modern Italian food made the place an instant hit. The menu included gnocchi with rocket pesto, veal with eggplant puree and roasted red peppers ("a lot of rocket and roasted pepper!" says Macali) and one of Melbourne's first panna cottas. Looking back, Macali doesn't rate the Kent pizzas but they were good enough to lure bon vivants Ronnie Di Stasio and Donlevy Fitzpatrick all the way from St Kilda.

The Martini/Macali partnership clicked. "Rita and I could do a busy service without saying a word," says Martini. "We knew each other's rhythms and movements." By 1996, both women felt it was time to branch out. "We were joined at the hip, but I felt I needed to be my own person," says Macali. She did a stint at upscale est est est then spent another year in Italy, working at Michelin-starred Symposium Quattro Stagioni in Le Marche, soaking up the reverence for produce both humble ("lemons, apples, oranges") and deluxe ("truffles delivered in a red velvet bag").

Back in Melbourne, she worked as co-head chef at St Kilda's white-hot Luxe for two years. "It was a great time, we were determined to produce beautiful food, but we were all overworked," she says. "I burnt myself out, then died in the arse." She fled, spending a few months away from cooking, dabbling with part-time jobs at artisan pizza pioneer I Carusi as a waitress and at the Queen Victoria Market's French Shop. "It was great for me to get that interaction with people," she says. "Chefs are stuck in the kitchen. Among themselves they're fine but get them out into the normal world..."

In 2001, city lunch institution Caterina's became her relatively soft re-entry into cheffing. Restaurateur Caterina Borsato looks back on the two years with Macali as something of a golden age. "She taught me to care about produce," says Borsato. "Rita would only ever get in whole fish. She would run her hand down it and bless the fish, giving respect to the sea, then start to break it down. I've never bought fillets since. Her food isn't complicated but how many people stuff up the simple things, deep-fried cauliflower, tomato sauce, salad? You ask Rita to dress you a salad: oh my god, it's the lightness of touch, the way she can pick up a bit of salt in her fingers and know that it's enough."

Rita Macali with her daughter, Liliana, who was born just before Macali's life fell apart.



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Meanwhile, Macali had kept up a connection with Sean Kierce and his girlfriend, Ingrid Langtry, from the Kent days, when they were aspiring designers earning bucks as waiters. "We were good friends," says Kierce. "We all followed North Melbourne and it was the Wayne Carey glory days so we had some good times going to the footy. Rita's boisterous, she likes to get into it, and we were all pretty impressed when North Melbourne players came into the Kent Hotel." At the end of 2002, Kierce and Langtry sold a deli and were looking for another project. "We asked Rita if she wanted to be in it with us and when she said 'yeah' Ingrid and I fell over backwards. We thought, 'Oh man, this is awesome. Rita's such a great chef, a great person, let's get organised.'"

The three travelled to Italy in early 2003, spending a couple of weeks in Carpineto Romano. "The moment we stepped off the plane we went to an aunty's place," says Kierce. "Antipasto came out, then some magnificent handmade pasta with porcini mushrooms and olive oil. Then I was pretty full, thinking we can go to our house now and have a sleep. Then the meat came out! All you could hear was 'mangia, mangia, eat, eat!' and from that point on I was never hungry." The trio went to Naples and Rome to eat pizza, all the while developing a vision for what would become Ladro, based on Macali's cooking and a design that was inspired by the village buildings they saw on their travels. The trip was also something of an audition: Macali was figuring out whether she could work with the pair. "On the way to the airport to fly home I said to Sean, 'You know what, I think it's going to be OK,'" she recalls. "It felt right."

Ladro opened in October 2003 and the good vibes lasted for nearly three years. "We got along famously well," says Kierce. "Of course you have disagreements but nothing we couldn't resolve." Macali had become confident enough to shrug off her French training and base her dishes on the simple food she ate at home and in her family's village. "It took me years to realise that I can cook Italian food really well, that I enjoy it, so why not do that in a restaurant?" she says. Melbourne went mental for the food and full-throttle mood and Ladro was named best new restaurant in the 2005 *Age Good Food Guide*.

That year, Giovanni Patane started working at Ladro as a waiter, fresh →

cover story

from the sale of his city restaurant Sud and a marriage break-up. He had his eye on Macali. "There was an attraction there for me and I don't have that with a lot of women," he says.

Macali didn't leap. "He started trying to ask me out and I was too busy, too busy, too busy," she says. "I didn't want any distractions. I was focused on cooking." Six months went by. "I persisted," says Patane. "Finally, she had a couple of hours to see me." They went out for Japanese. "He had the rose on the table," snorts Macali. "I was like, 'Oh my god, too old school.' But I really liked Giovanni, he's a really lovely guy and we became a couple. When I fell pregnant, it was a pleasant surprise."

But after Lilianna was born in July 2006, things started to fall apart from all angles. Macali's headaches – a long-term feature of her life, "we always had Panadol in the shopping trolley," says Patane – became unbearable. "They were so strong they were just everywhere," says Macali. Her GP put it down to the stresses of new motherhood; eventually she had a CAT scan. "They found a big lump there, a meningioma that had been growing for years, a benign tumour in the pineal gland," she says. Three days later, she had the first of three brain operations over five months, totalling 40 hours under the knife. "The tumour was in a tricky spot," she says. "If you cut an apple in half, it was right where the seeds are." With each surgery, more of the rogue tissue was removed, and the surgery was declared a success. "I didn't suffer any more headaches but I was very weak," says Macali. "I had lost a lot of blood in surgery, I was really low in iron, and I had a baby daughter."

"If Rita hadn't got sick we would have parted ways sooner than we did, only because of Giovanni being involved," says Kierce, who notes that he and Langtry were devastated by Macali's illness and supportive through it. But with Macali indisposed, Patane attempted to take her part in the business. The situation became tense. "We didn't want to have someone in the business that we didn't want in the business and that's all there is to it. Unfortunately, Rita couldn't understand that," says Kierce.

She still doesn't. "I wanted Giovanni to represent me when I wasn't there and they didn't want that. They felt threatened by him, he's a big personality. They even told him not to speak Italian: 'we don't want any of this 'ciao' business.' It was terrible. It got very ugly. They said they wanted me to stay but they didn't want Giovanni there. 'Business is business,' they said. It was their way or no way." Lawyers mediated a settlement in May 2008 and that's the last time the parties saw each other. "I'm over it but we're not on speaking terms," says Macali. All parties are sad about the split. "If it wasn't for Rita, Ingrid and I wouldn't be where we are today. And if it wasn't for us, Rita wouldn't be where she is either," says Kierce. "It's like a divorce. It's all beautiful along the way and then things change. I still like Rita and respect her and I'm happy that's she's doing well."

It took a while for Macali to regroup. "I kept it all together while I

was sick but a year later, after the settlement, I crashed," she says. "It was brought on by all the trauma and the stress. It was anxiety, maybe with a bit of depression. I didn't want to go out. I saw a psychologist and I took Xanax." She and Patane took a year out, spent time in the garden, went to the beach, hung out with their little girl. "Surgery in the brain stuffs you up, not physically but mentally," says Macali. "Someone has gone into your brain! I believed something had to be wrong with me, I didn't trust I was actually fine."

Family support was critical during Macali's recovery. There was never any question they would rally around. "Mum and Dad were always really supportive," says Rita's older sister, Lucy. "Right from when we were little, they helped us pursue anything we wanted to do." The family lived in Clifton Hill then, from 1977, in Thornbury. Frank Macali worked as a TV technician, for Myer and Hills and, later, in his own Thornbury business. Once the three children – Lucy, Rita and Luigi – were at school, Anna Macali worked at Visyboard in Reservoir as tea lady and leading hand on the factory floor. "We didn't have many toys, we didn't have much money, but it was no big deal," says Rita. "We had a really happy home. We were blessed, I think. We did everything together." Social life revolved around dinner dances and picnics organised by the Italian club. Rita was a tomboy who played cricket, threw rocks, entertained the family with magic shows and, briefly, tortured them with the violin. She became a teenager who lurved Kids in the Kitchen ("We all thought Scott Carne was pretty lovely and we chased them around the shopping centres," says Lucy) and Spandau Ballet ("In 1985, Rita declared her undying love for the lead singer at Tullamarine – 'I love you, Tony! – then we followed them to the Hilton," says Lucy).



The journey

1. Rita Macali with Karen White at Luxe, the St Kilda restaurant that pioneered the trend for high-end food in a casual cafe environment.
2. Any shape you like as long as it's not round: Macali's wonky pizzas at Ladro

kickstarted the wave of artisan pizza restaurants.
3. Macali with former Ladro business partners Sean Kierce and Ingrid Langtry in 2004, when they won *The Age Good Food Guide's* award for best new restaurant.

4. The interior of Macali's new restaurant, Supermaxi, in North Fitzroy.
5. The no-fuss dishes at Supermaxi include this homestyle veal cutlet with coleslaw. Photography **Fairfax Archive**

Rita's pizza

Rita Macali's easy stovetop pizza

600ml warm water
25g fresh yeast
1kg plain flour
3 tsp salt

Add half the warm water to the yeast. Mix well with a whisk. Let sit for five minutes. In a bowl add the flour and salt. Then mix in all the water and yeast and with only one hand, mix it in all together, then knead for about seven minutes or until well-kneaded. Add a little flour if required. Allow to sit and prove until doubled in size. Roll into four or six balls, cover with a damp cloth, allow to prove for half an hour. Roll out into discs, then place on a very hot char grill or a griddle pan. Before you cook them, brush a little olive oil on the side you cook first, but not too much as you will burn the dough. Once cooked on one side, flip over and cook the other side until golden brown. You can do these one day ahead, then when you need them, top with favourite topping and place in a hot oven and cook until crisp.

Pizza topping ideas

1. green olive paste; capers; rocket leaves dressed with lemon, oil, salt and pepper.
2. tomato sauce; mozzarella; prosciutto; olive oil.
3. salami; tomato sauce; mozzarella; provolone cheese.

The Macalis kept their Italian food traditions, with their veggie garden, annual tomato sauce-bottling fiesta and a diet of simple food: pasta fagioli, minestrone with whatever was growing, chicken broth with homemade pasta. Karen Martini loved visiting their home when the two worked together. "Her nonna was there, the archetypal Italian grandmother, and you could see the love of food in the house," she says. "They lived and breathed it, I wished my family was more like that." But until Rita Macali caught the cooking bug, she didn't hoe into food like the rest of her family. "Rita was a fussy eater as a child," says Lucy. "She didn't eat very much and she didn't like any of Mum's cooking. It was a real surprise to all of us that she wanted to cook." Year 10 work experience at the cafeteria at Alphington paper mill was a turning point. "I did it well and I realised it made me happy to be with food," says Macali. "Even though I was just making rissole sandwiches, I made sure it was the best rissole sandwich they would ever have." She was a popular student, a prefect and a bit of a sports star (though even then she suffered headaches when she ran), but she quit Santa Maria College during year 12 to take up an apprenticeship.

"Mum and Dad would rather I went to work in a bank," says Macali. "They didn't like those hard, long hours." They got on board, though. If Rita worked a split shift and came home in the afternoon, Anna would have her uniform washed and ironed in time for the night shift. Frank would pick her up at 1am and Anna would prepare dinner in the wee hours.

They still help out: Anna prepares the lupini beans that are a nibble at Supermaxi; Frank picks up the daily bread and delivers lemons from the backyard tree. "They still worry about everything too," says Lucy. "They weren't sure about the name, Dad was worried that the sign was too small and no one would find the place. But they thought the same about Ladro so I reminded Dad about that and he said, 'Oh, it might be all right.'" It is: Supermaxi opened in March and, again, Melbourne wants to eat where Rita Macali is cooking. Macali wants to be there too. "Everything that happened to me has made me stronger," she says, pulling a bubbling pizza from her oven. "I feel really comfortable in the kitchen. I like seeing people eat. I can walk, talk, I can cook. It keeps me happy." (m)