

# BUZZ FEED

The man behind some of Melbourne's hottest laneway restaurants is moving into Sydney – and luring one of the harbour city's best chefs south. Is Chris Lucas biting off more than he can chew?

STORY BY *Dani Valent* | PORTRAIT BY *Simon Schluter*

CHRIS LUCAS is fresh off a plane from Europe, jet-lagged enough to have to check what day it is. "Tuesday, right?" But sitting in the office of his five-restaurant Lucas Group, the 56-year-old behind some of Melbourne's most popular places to eat is wide-eyed and talking a mile a minute as he outlines his most ambitious move yet: a two-pronged assault on Sydney.

The first step will happen later this month when Lucas opens a Sydney outpost of Chin Chin, the hip Melbourne eatery known as much for its no-bookings policy and queues around the block as its delicious Thai curries. (If you haven't arrived by 5pm, expect a two-hour wait.) Second, Lucas is spirited away one of Sydney's most lauded chefs, Martin Benn. Voted "One to Watch" in the 2015 World's 50 Best Restaurants awards, Benn's three-hat CBD bistro Sepia, which he has run with wife Vicki Wild since 2009, is closing next year. The trio plan to open a new, top-end Lucas Group restaurant in Melbourne in 2018 and are already scouring the city for a site.

It's a risky double move for Lucas, whose career in restaurants spans 22 years. Everyone keeps telling him Sydney is fickle, expensive and hardly short of modern Asian restaurants. The Sepia situation, meanwhile, has raised eyebrows in the industry: Lucas has made his reputation as an impresario of casual cool, a marketing magician who whips up buzz and translates it into customer

numbers in places where hearing yourself think is less of a priority than simply being there. Sepia is highly regarded, having been voted the country's best restaurant by both critics and chefs – but way too sophisticated ever to be considered "hot".

What makes someone like Lucas want to cosy up to someone like Benn, a thoughtful and precise chef widely considered capable of taking New York or London by storm? Is it hubris, or something else? "You'd never do anything if you're scared," Lucas notes.

His office has something of the general's lair. On one wall is a map of Melbourne's CBD, like an overview of a battlefield. Reconnaissance for his Sydney incursion is stored in a cabinet. He reaches into a drawer and pulls out photos of the 1915 Griffiths Tea Buildings in Surry Hills that will house the new Chin Chin. He flicks adoringly through postcards that show off the Flatiron-style front corner, chunky timber beams and dusty factory windows. The challenge of taking on a new city is "very exciting", he says, "but I'm not doing it because I have ambitions to be a national restaurateur. It's because I fell in love with this building."

Lucas conjures up his vision for the restaurant. "We've got a rotisserie and a charcoal pit, an open kitchen so the chefs are in the dining room. There's a big table they are picking herbs from, two giant mortar and pestles ... they're grinding and doing all their stuff right there." I bet he can smell the Thai basil, too.



After 22 years in the restaurant business, Chris Lucas is seen as a man with almost instinctive flair to spot a trend and run with it. "You make your own luck," he says.



The refurbishment is almost ready, but the path to bringing Chin Chin Sydney to this point has been long and difficult. Heritage listings inside and out made for a painstaking renovation: fire regulations meant the vintage floorboards had to be lifted up, a cement slab laid between floors, and the boards carefully relaid on top. Just acquiring a liquor licence took 18 months; Lucas claims the authorities were spooked by the saucy branding of Chin Chin Melbourne's basement GoGo Bar. "I had to spend six months convincing them we weren't going to do pole-dancing," he says. "They don't know Chin Chin from Bob's hot-dog stand. I had to show them menus, take them to the building. They had to be convinced I wasn't using it as a front for some kind of underworld bar."

He's at pains to explain that this will be a Sydney restaurant, not a Melbourne rerun. A third of the menu – rotisserie duck, fish curries with charcoal-cooked seafood – has been especially crafted for this venue. The staff will be mostly from Sydney, too. "It's our DNA but it's about this building and this city," he says.

As for luring Benn to Melbourne, Lucas is baffled by the suggestion that he doesn't do fine dining. His first restaurant was the smart St Kilda brasserie One Fitzroy Street in 1995. With Botanical in South Yarra, he turned a tired pub into a see-and-be-seen-in clubhouse. It attracted two hats and became *The Age Good Food Guide's* restaurant of the year in 2004.

His newest Melbourne restaurant, Kisumé, is a three-level love letter to Japan, just down Flinders Lane from Chin Chin but markedly different in tone. At Chin Chin the customers are the attraction; at Kisumé, the entrance opens to a long, spot-lit sushi counter where half a dozen chefs wield knives, torch fish and shape rice for diners facing them. Upstairs, a bar dedicated to chablis gives onto a kaiseki counter, a 12-seat salon attended by one highly skilled chef. In the basement is a seething hot kitchen spilling with energy. Service is expert but not snooty.

"I don't see restaurants as formal or informal," says Lucas. "I see them as good or not good. If I was going to do a pie, it would be a good pie. It's about quality in a relative sense and should be inviting, good value and friendly."

**L**UCAS IS dressed in the uniform of the unassumingly wealthy: black T-shirt, jeans, leather boots and a hefty watch. He's wearing a few meals around the midriff but is overflowing with energy, boosted by regular dawn training sessions in the sloping park that surrounds the Melbourne Cricket Ground, not far from his Richmond home. (He lives there with his fiancée Sarah Lew, ex-daughter-in-law of magnate Solomon Lew, and her daughters Liv, 12, and Bella, 10.) "It's one of the most beautiful undiscovered parklands of Melbourne," Lucas says. "The vista, the MCG, the city: it's iconic Melbourne and I virtually have it to myself every morning."

The setting is a long way from his beginnings in Geelong, 80 kilometres south-west of the city, where he grew up as the only child of Greek immigrants, his publican father Kon and his stay-at-home mother Rita.

Kon Loukas and three of his brothers were orphaned during the Greco-Turkish war of 1919-22. They landed as refugees in Sydney in 1923 and were taken in by a Catholic hostel that trained them as cooks. Kon's brother Harry stood out, moving to Melbourne and later becoming executive chef at the Southern Cross, the city's first modern hotel. When 10-year-old Chris

visited with his parents, Harry put them up at the hotel and allowed him into the kitchen.

"I remember seeing amazing desserts, towers of cakes, croquebouches, ice sculptures," he says. "It was like a fancy show. We couldn't afford to go to anything like that. We wouldn't even have thought of it. That's where my first inklings about restaurants started."

As with many a child of immigrants, young Chris was steered towards tertiary education, but the pull to hospitality was strong. "I used to go to the pub for breakfast, then my mother would bring casseroles to school that fed half the class, then I'd go straight to the pub after school," he says. "I'd hang around, make toasted sandwiches and eventually I got taught to cook."

His father turned out basic pub fare – steaks, schnitzels, roasts – but also Greek rissoles, casseroles, spanakopita. "Our pubs were near the wharves in Geelong," says Lucas. "A builder's labourer would turn up and say, 'What's this wog shit, Kon?' He goes, 'Just eat it. If you

Chris Lucas with Sepia's Martin Benn and Vicki Wild, pictured in Melbourne, where they'll open a new restaurant next year.

don't like it, you don't have to pay for it.' Later they'd say, 'Wow, this wog shit's all right.'"

When he was 12, Lucas and his mother spent a year on the Greek island of Lemnos; she wanted him to understand the homeland she had left in 1956. His dad stayed behind to run the pub. "I saw a life I'd never seen," Lucas says. "Everything was built around food." He was particularly struck by communal wood ovens that were as much local newsrooms as food hubs, where people swapped gossip while waiting for their bread to bake. "I was amazed by it, especially the smell," he says. "I'd grown up with Tip-Top."

He developed a vision of what food was meant to be – "amazing, delicious, not complicated" – but decades would pass before he had a chance to create his own wood-oven heaven. When he was 15, his father died of a heart attack. "We struggled," he says. "The pub was sold, we nearly lost the house and my mother brought me up on a widow's pension."



His father had seen university as a path to a better life for his son, so Lucas studied for a pharmacy degree at Monash University: “At the time from a sense of obligation but in retrospect, I’m glad I did it.” As much as his mother hoped he’d become a doctor (“She’d tell people at church I was like a doctor”), dispensing drugs was never his passion. Every university holiday, he worked in kitchens. “I was never a very good chef but I can cook,” he says.

Lucas gave the first indication of his gift for spotting a trend in 1981. When IBM brought a roadshow to Monash University, the student jumped at the chance of a job marketing computers after finishing his degree. He stayed with the company until 1992, working in Sydney, Silicon Valley, New York, London and Tokyo, taking full advantage of a generous expense account that allowed him to eat at great restaurants, and party in famous clubs such as London’s Annabel’s and New York’s Studio 54.

He soaked it up but always felt there was something not quite right about the attitude of highly rated places such as Le Cirque, which would become notorious for treating *The New York Times* food critic Ruth Reichl with disdain when she arrived anonymously and dressed plainly. “Those places were a big buzz and definitely fascinating but gee, they were snobby, rude, the epitome of non-hospitality,” he says. “It never sat comfortably with me. There was always that provincial Greek boy that thought, ‘Just stop with the bullshit.’”

Those were heady days for the burgeoning computer industry. Lucas recalls a young Bill Gates presenting a conference paper on MS-DOS, the operating system that would make him the world’s richest man. “I asked the guy next to me what it was all about. He said, ‘Don’t worry about it, we’re not going to sell that many of them.’” He visited the research centre where Xerox PARC had developed a prototype mouse – “a big box that you could barely shove around”. It took Apple’s Steve Jobs to turn it into a ubiquitous palm-sized object.

Unlikely as it might seem, hearing that story was a foundation moment for Chris Lucas, restaurateur. “Jobs built a bridge between the technology and the average person,” he says. “He gave it a form humans could relate to. It taught me about being able to see things as

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they’re not – or not yet. It’s not necessarily about the idea. The real skill is to take the idea and re-create it in such a way that it gets greater acceptance.”

Lucas also emerged from IBM with the courage to think big. “I was exposed to the international world of marketing and big business at an age when many people are still finding their way,” he says. “It gave me a global perspective and I guess it taught me that if you’re going to do something, do something significant. It gave me the confidence to be a little more fearless and to go up the food chain.”

In 1992, Lucas returned to Australia, ready to put his marketing skills to different ends. He stuck with IT for a while but had his sights set on hospitality. In 1995, he launched One Fitzroy Street, a cafe and modern Australian restaurant with bay views. “I was on the floor, learning the basics,” he says. “I rolled up my sleeves and

Below: the Griffiths Tea building, in Sydney’s Surry Hills, soon to be home to Chris Lucas’s Chin Chin restaurant.



got started.” There’s a view that Lucas made a motza in IT and used his tech millions to indulge in an expensive hobby. “I didn’t,” he says. “There’s no Mark Zuckerberg story. Sadly.”

By 2003, the year Lucas opened Botanical, he’d been in the restaurant business for almost a decade. But he still had to borrow from the bank, mortgage the family home (with then wife Tracey and their three children) and tap family connections for the \$7 million it took to purchase and renovate the hotel. In 2007 he sold the leasehold for a reported \$15 million, while holding on to the building. (He’s still landlord but has no involvement in the business.)

The move provided a handy foundation for future businesses. “It gave me the capability to do other things but there’s no simple answer to where the money comes from,” Lucas says. “It’s taken 30 years of hard work.

“A lot of people are happy to throw around ‘He’s lucky’ but there’s no real lucky. You make your own luck.”

**F**OR ALL his success, some mutter that Lucas is more marketing gun than restaurateur, a non-chef with more interest in trends than great food, and more business acumen than is perhaps considered seemly in the art of hospitality. Roslyn Grundy, co-editor of the *Good Food Guide*, reckons that’s a little unfair. “I think he’s a restaurant enthusiast,” she says. “He’s very clever at tapping into trends and giving people what they want.”

Does it matter that he doesn’t run things from the kitchen? “Many successful places are chef-driven but it doesn’t mean the soul is ripped out of a restaurant just because it’s not run by a chef,” she says. Indeed, many of Australia’s top restaurants are part of large multi-venue conglomerates: think Justin Hemmes’s Merivale (the Ivy, Fred’s), the Fink Group (Quay, Bennelong, The Bridge Room), even Neil Perry’s Rockpool Dining Group, which is now owned by a private equity outfit.

Lucas tells me about a trip to Pompeii a decade ago with his three then-teenage children. The ruins of restaurants caught his eye. “Even 2000 years ago, socialising in restaurants was commonplace,” he says. “They showed us wood ovens, big stone woks with log fires



underneath, like induction cooking. You could see that the art of running restaurants wasn't much different to the way it is today – give or take a point-of-sale machine. The principles are ancient.”

Lucas credits that realisation as part of the inspiration for Chin Chin, though that isn't immediately evident when you stand there surrounded by tattooed young waiters ferrying green papaya salad to gaggles of diners yelling over the music. But that's pure Lucas. “He's a genius with concepts,” says John Kanis, general manager of The Lucas Group since 2009. “Chris is like an artist and a businessman and a conductor put together. It's a rare skill set.”

The motivation to partner with Martin Benn is part of his long game. “I've always harboured an ambition to work with a great talent, like a Hollywood actor might say they want to work with Steven Spielberg,” says Lucas. “Martin is my Spielberg. I've never seen anything like his food anywhere in the world.”

Lucas thinks Benn's technique-driven, Japanese-inspired cuisine should be showcased in a restaurant that amplifies its potential. But why attract “Spielberg” to Melbourne? “They told me their Sydney lease was running out. An idea started to form. The more we

From top: Chin Chin Melbourne has been like a “runaway train”; chefs at Kisumé's sushi bar face the diners.

talked, the more we found we have the same mindset about restaurants. We want them to be accessible, young, fresh, exciting. I said to Martin and Vicki, ‘I don't know Sydney so well but I do know Melbourne. Would you move?’ They took three seconds to say yes.”

Sepia co-owner Vicki Wild says the partnership feels like a dream come true. “He came to us and said, ‘I love what you do and I want to give you a better platform.’ How often in your life do those opportunities come along? It's music to your ears.” She appreciates his commercial savvy and loves that the bookwork will be taken off her hands. But the foundation of her decision to make the leap is clear: “Chris is a visionary.”

I hear the comment again and again: yes, he's driven, determined, persuasive and commercially acute, but the key is his ability to see what's missing. Lucas approaches each restaurant as a mood piece, accreting details that make them feel different and compelling. At the high-end Botanical he ditched tablecloths and created a wine wall from which diners could pluck their own bottles. With top British chef Paul Wilson, he instituted an early iteration of the now-ubiquitous gourmet burger, theirs featuring wagyu beef and a duck egg. It was a double whammy: relatively cheap to pro-

duce, sensationally tasty. Wilson called that Botanical offering the “best burger in town ... also the difference between making a profit or not each month”.

At Pearl, bought in 2009, Lucas rescued an ailing upscale Asian restaurant and experimented with wine lists on iPads, before changing direction entirely, reopening it in 2013 as a slick pizza parlour called Baby. In 2014 a nearby cafe was reimagined as Korean barbecue hangout Kong. But Chin Chin, which opened in 2011, became the runaway train: a big, noisy city restaurant with chirpy service, irreverent, flavour-packed Asian dishes and be-seen cachet. With Hawker Hall, which opened in 2015, he melded the energy of an Asian food market with craft beer and funky tunes in Windsor.

At all five of his Melbourne restaurants, the food is important – but so is being at the heart of the city's dining culture.

**P**OPPING IN to Kisumé for lunch, Lucas observes sushi master Moon Kyung Soo present this week's bluefin tuna, shipped from Port Lincoln and filleted on the bench, along with some tasty morsels he plans to add to the menu. “Nothing changes in any of my restaurants unless I've signed off on it,” Lucas tells me. “Not one comma on a menu.”

Such micro-management isn't always easy to deal with. “His honest opinion can be upsetting,” says Chin Chin executive chef Benjamin Cooper, who has spent six years with Lucas. “As a chef, it's an artistic endeavour, you are emotionally attached to what you're doing and sometimes the critique can be really harsh. But I've learnt that if I can pull myself back from it and pull the value out of his comments, the dish will end up in a better place.”

He cites a coconut, sago and corn dessert that polarised diners when first introduced. Lucas made him take it off the menu, though Cooper was adamant the concept could work. Over the next eight months, he experimented, settling on rendering the corn as sweetcorn ice-cream. “Now it's probably our top dessert,” Cooper says. He and his boss still lock horns, he admits, but it's made him a better chef. “I'm used to Chris saying, ‘What the f...s that?’ Now I have answers ready, or the dish speaks louder and can answer those questions itself.”

Lucas has a big team working to realise his vision. The Lucas Group bunker, just around the corner from Chin Chin, houses a 30-person support group for the 800 staff across two CBD and three inner-suburban restaurants, plus the upcoming Sydney outpost. His 26-year-old daughter Holly is marketing manager of the group. “He asks me to come to him with 10 of my craziest ideas and he will be able to cut straight through and tell me what's feasible,” she says.

Does Lucas know what people want? Melbourne's diners seem to think so. His restaurants serve up to 25,000 people each week, fuelled in part by a social media presence that leaves most of his rivals eating cyber dust. In the first six months of 2017, the group's Instagram accounts received almost 180,000 likes and comments. On Facebook, their pages racked up more than 15 million impressions. In the Australian restaurant game, it's fair to say that no one does buzz quite like Chris Lucas.

WILL THE Sydney venture be his making or his breaking? A move interstate is never straightforward, as others who have tried will attest. Frank Camorra's MoVida was the last

big-name Melbourne restaurant to push into Sydney. It opened in Surry Hills in 2012 but closed last year (an airport pit-stop, however, still attracts passengers hankering for croquettes or coffee). “We were busy for the first couple of years but Sydney is more fickle than Melbourne,” says Camorra. “It’s village-like, even territorial, and in the end I think we chose the wrong location.” There were other difficulties, too. “Staff were harder to find in Sydney, rents were massive and goods were more expensive. We’d bring in the same South Australian calamari and pay 25 per cent more in Sydney than Melbourne.”

Even so, the chef and co-owner of three thriving Spanish outlets in Melbourne rates Lucas’s chances, partly because Chin Chin will open in a better location, in a vibrant restaurant area that includes Longrain and Nomad as neighbours. Camorra admires what Lucas has achieved. “He’s raised the bar for that casual, good-quality food experience and done it with different cuisines, which is impressive,” he says.

Paul Wilson knows the Sydney market, too, having spent 18 months at Bondi’s famous Icebergs in 2013-14: “Sydney is an aggressive market, it doesn’t take any prisoners.” Lucas’s move, he says, won’t be straightforward. “It’s risky but he’s tenacious and his enthusiasm for the business of restaurants is second to none.”

Rockpool Dining Group’s Neil Perry knows what it takes to succeed in both cities and the challenges Lucas can expect to face. “When I brought Rockpool Bar and Grill to Melbourne [in 2006], I was very focused on going in with the appropriate humility, embracing Victorian

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produce and wine, and employing Melbourne staff,” he says. “I wanted to be part of what was already a great restaurant city. It’s a matter of making your appeal to the local market.” He rates Lucas a good chance of success: “He clearly knows what he’s doing. There’s no reason why he shouldn’t be able to do something in Sydney if he has the right location and delivers on a quality promise.”

**O**F LUCAS’S three children, the only one to work in the food business is Holly; son Conrad, 24, is a banker and Ryley, 21, is a free-style skier eyeing the next Winter Olympics.

His children have had different upbringings to his, but Lucas hopes their values are similar. “I didn’t know about the haves and have-nots,” he says. “We never went without, but we didn’t have holidays, and after my father died I had to work. But it was just normal. Only when I look back now and see the luxuries some kids have do I realise it was tough.

“I’ve tried to instil working-class principles in my kids: an honest day’s work for an honest day’s dollar. No short cuts, as my father used to tell me. That’s the bedrock of how I conduct myself. It doesn’t matter what scale you’re at, you don’t forget those things. The more successful you

are, the more humble and honest you have to be with yourself about what got you there. The only thing that got you there is hard work.”

Talking in the muted light of Kisumé, I can’t help noticing that Lucas seems to have picked up a European tan. Is it possible that the all-balls-in-the-air businessman also knows how to relax? Yes, according to old friend George Kailis, who recalls fishing trips, Geelong footy games and competitive dinner parties where Lucas showed off recipes he’d learnt in Thai or Italian cooking classes. There was always excellent wine, especially French, drunk with great reverence.

Kailis mentions another passion, more surprising. “Chris is particularly fond of sleeping. He’s the world’s best catnapper. If he can find half an hour to duck out, he’ll fall asleep in 30 seconds flat, recharge himself and come back bigger than Texas.”

Will Lucas ever chill out for good? “I’m not on a manic drive to open as many restaurants as I can,” he says. “But this is a way of life for me. I love what I do. I don’t put any boundaries or timelines on it and I don’t really agree with the principle of retirement.”

So how does he measure success? “Not in numbers,” he says. He tells me of a favourite moment at Chin Chin, when he walked in at lunchtime to see a young couple having their wedding meal. “She’s in her bridal gown, he’s in a tuxedo, just the two of them,” he says. “They were sweet kids from Dandenong. I bought them lunch, a bottle of champagne. She told me it was her dream to celebrate her wedding at Chin Chin.”

He beams at the memory, almost mistily. “That’s success,” he says. “That’s all I need.” ■