

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

ADVENTURE

A journey from plate to palette

BY JAN MCGUINNESS

AT LE CALANDRE near Padova, Italy, the lemon risotto usually comes to the table redolent of the aroma-enhancing lemon vapour applied as it leaves the kitchen.

But for Melbourne artist Jeff Martin, arriving hot, bothered and late after a five-hour drive from France, Le Calandre's three-star Michelin chef Massimiliano Alajmo decided an aroma-inhibiting squirt of pine-scented spray was more appropriate.

Such are the fun and games behind the scenes at some of Europe's very best restaurants as Martin and filmmaker Dave Budge discovered chasing the late northern summer weather south, gathering footage, stills and sketches in five celebrated kitchens for the first stage of their planned *Back of House* television series.

Martin is no stranger to

restaurant kitchens. He has worked back and front of house in some of Melbourne's best and run his own cafe (Lemons in Camberwell), largely to support his painting "habit", which, since a successful 2007 showing, he has pursued full time.

Around then, Martin decided he wanted to capture movement in a real-life environment where people didn't stop — perhaps dance was the answer. Then came the light-bulb moment. He had worked in kitchens for years and had ready access to an environment much like dance where there is a rhythm to the way people work and move.

"So I rang Geoff Lindsay at Pearl with this crazy idea to sketch the kitchen during dinner service," says Martin. "No one batted an eye because I spoke their language, knew how to move around and how to stay out of the way... it went



Artist Jeff Martin (top right) is travelling the world, sketching the behind-the-scenes action of the top restaurants.

from there with the project just evolving as I decided to use big canvases to convey the spaces."

So far "the project" has produced successful exhibitions at Gould Galleries featuring the kitchen dynamics of 15 leading Melbourne restaurants (including Grossi Florentino, Flower Drum, Pearl, Da Noi, Vue de Monde, Jacques Reymond) and 15 in Sydney (including Quay, Claude's, Sean's Panorama, Buon Ricordo, Tetsuya's and Bilson's) scheduled to coincide with the cities' food and wine festivals.

Martin takes photographs, too, and works his paintings up from them and his notebooks of drawings. "But photos alone don't do it. I have to be there, to feel the energy of the service and how it works, all the little nuances of movement and the machinations that bring everything together," he says.

The results are multi-layered works that reward close inspection for all they convey about the behind-the-scenes mood, ambience and personalities of some of our most famous public dining places. Focused on taking the idea international, Martin started at the

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top and approached Noma's Rene Redzepi in Denmark. With one of the world's best chefs in the bag, the other four he had chosen for reasons of interest and geography just fell into place.

Martin and director Budge hit the road armed with several small suction-mounted cameras and a format encompassing food, art and travel — first stop, Copenhagen.

"We got to Noma about 4pm, in time for me to address the pre-dinner staff briefing," Martin says. "They have four daily briefings — in the morning, pre-lunch, pre-dinner and post-dinner — something I've never heard of anywhere else.

"But what impressed me most was the chefs' involvement with guests and the table. Whoever is free greets guests at the door and knows their names and language."

All night, Martin and Budge were handed plates to sample and had

food popped in their mouths, though none of the paintings will show Noma's renowned dishes from the surrounding soil and sea, focusing instead on the passion and dedication of producing food at such a high level. Next afternoon, they interviewed Redzepi, an exponent of the New Naturals take on authentic, local produce. The next stop was Sluis, a small Dutch border town much frequented by Belgians for its beguiling mix of sex and teashops. In among the waffles and latex is Oud Sluis, a three-star Michelin restaurant run by chef Sergio Herman and his family.

Here the food is very delicate, labour-intensive and visually impressive, with some dishes taking four people an hour to prepare. A feature of the specially designed kitchen is a hydraulic-operated bar-becue that is raised seemingly from nowhere in the middle of the stainless steel bench and topped with a glass canopy that drops from above. Music pumps through the kitchen pre-service and it's all good fun.

During the interview in front of his restaurant, autograph seekers constantly interrupted Herman. Then it was on to Paris and



Le Chateaubriand, ranked No. 11 in the world but a typical neighbourhood bistro in a rough part of town complete with zinc bars, chalkboards and wooden chairs where chef Inaki Aizpitarte serves affordable haute cuisine influenced by his Basque roots.

"Eight people work in a space smaller than the average domestic kitchen, serving more than 1000 plates each night," says Martin. "Be at the bar around 9.30pm and you might be lucky enough to join the second sitting. The seven to 10-course degustation menu costs only €50 (\$A67) plus wine — they could charge double that and still be full.

"These guys are the rock stars of the top 50, all playboys, all handsome and a lot of fun. I reckon Inaki took a dish to every good-looking female in the restaurant without missing a beat in the kitchen."

Bras, run by Michel Bras and his son Sebastien, is by contrast in the middle of the countryside and housed dramatically in an ultra-modern farmhouse on a hill. It is fiercely devoted to serving the cuisine based on local, seasonal and superior ingredients. Father and son regard themselves as artisans rather than artists constrained by the ingredients they have to hand. Since Martin creates out of nothing but what is in his head, they consider that to be more challenging, reflecting, says Martin, how most Europeans look at art.

Finally, the dash to Le Calandre, where the highlight of the 12-course degustation menu was the playful dessert accompanied by illustrated cards depicting the tastes and sensory sensations of childhood.

"It's all a mystery until you realise that the cards relate to the

dishes," says Martin. "First comes birth, a rich, decadent and comforting chocolate drink. Motherhood is shaped like a breast topped with a chocolate-covered nipple through which you get a burst of warm liqueur... and so on until bedtime, which is an Oral-B kid's toothbrush topped with piped strawberry mousse."

On his jacket, chef Massimiliano Alajmo, in his mid-20s, sports the drawing of a chef he did as a child.

And how was it the team arrived late at Le Calandre? Because of a detour to Cannes, where Martin discussed his project with several television producers while catching up with his old mate Gary Mehigan of *MasterChef* fame, who'd flown in to attend a yacht party at MIPCOM, the international audiovisual content market.

It was in every sense a long way from the Dandenongs and Burnham Beeches country house where Martin and Mehigan met in 1991. Martin, his early career in advertising aborted by the financial fallout of the 1987 stock market crash, had retreated to the hills and gravitated to cooking. Mehigan, recently arrived from London, was the sous chef and, as Martin discovered and everyone else now knows, an excellent teacher. They had a lot to reflect on.

Martin's next step in the long-term project is visits in March and April to other international restaurants such as Biko in Mexico, California's The French Laundry, New York's Per Se and Britain's The Fat Duck. The *Back of House* project is expected to be completed early next year with an exhibition to follow.

LINK
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