

# WEST WEEKEND

NOVEMBER 03-04 2018

## ROBERT DREWE

Waving farewell to a long-serving sartorial sidekick

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## Choice Chow

THE MARGS CHEF KEEPING MUM

## COLD BORE

THE ODD LIFE OF A DIPLOMAT'S WIFE



# ON

# Song

All hail Santi Fernandez — the Leonard Cohen of the kitchen.

*plus »*

PRETTY PASTELS, HOT WINES AND LOVELY LILIES

The Weekend West

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**The West Australian**

Published for West Australian Newspapers Limited, ABN 98 008 667 632, 50 Hasler Road, Osborne Park, WA 6017, by Phil O'Toole and printed off set by Colourpress Pty Ltd, ABN 17 009 172 276, 54 Hasler Road, Osborne Park, WA, 6017. Registered by Australia Post Publication No. WBF 0906.  
 Recommended and maximum price only ISSN 0705-7792. West Weekend Magazine is a supplement to The Weekend West and must not be sold separately. There is a cross-media relationship between West Australian Newspapers Limited and Channel Seven Perth Pty Limited.

COVER SANTI FERNANDEZ PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE



*From the editor*

*As I write this, I'm transported back to a corner table in a fine dining room, where restaurant manager Andrew Dickinson and his team ensure the heavenly dishes coming out from the kitchen aren't spoiled by sloppy service. Voyager Estate head chef Santi Fernandez had persuaded me to stay after our interview to try his celebrated degustation. It was, without question, one of the finest meals I've eaten. So it was nice to see the amiable Spaniard and the Voyager team receive honours at The West Australian Good Food Guide Awards this week. It was also a reminder of how far Margaret River has come, with four restaurants in the top 10 and more still in the top 50. Thankfully for us city folks, there are many reasons to dine in Perth, too. Hope this edition whets your appetite.*



**Featured**  
 Eat your way around WA with our guide to the best joints in town and country.

**WEST WEEKEND**

November 3, 2018

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feature



PICTURES IAIN GILLESPIE

# Fantastic VOYAGE

This inveterate traveller has found his place — and made his home — in WA, writes **Julie Hosking**.

**G**rowing up in the small fishing village of Rianxo in Galicia, Santiago Fernandez dreamed of travelling to far-off lands in search of adventure — although if young Santi had his way, it would have been sailing the high seas as a ship captain.

Instead, the Spaniard ended up with his second choice, one he nominated simply because he could see it might take him around the world. But it was a job that he would slowly grow to appreciate until it became a consuming passion. A job that finally landed him, via Majorca, France, Germany, Russia and Victoria, on the edge of the Indian Ocean, in Margaret River. So it's natural perhaps that this accidental chef would christen the food philosophy he has been developing since he arrived at Voyager Estate in a manner reflecting the journey.

"It's Voyager cuisine, or Voyager food. If you go to the dictionary, a voyager is one that crosses continents or lands, mostly by sea, and I define myself as a voyager," he says. "It embraces everyone. Being a voyager is someone who is open-minded, a free thinker, and I like to define myself as that."

It's a sentiment expressed in every dish that comes out of his stellar kitchen, an at-times improbable marriage of ingredients lovingly crafted into an experience like no other. A degustation menu — go the seven-course, wine-matched option, you won't regret it — that transports the diner to a different place with each mouthful.

Take the dish that restaurant critic Rob Broadfield declared the best in WA in July, awarding the restaurant his equal highest score ever (18 out of 20). Like all of Santi's food, it started with a wine, in this case Voyager Estate's 2015 Project semillon sauvignon blanc. What was it telling him? "Let's start with WA marron, it is sweet flesh, delicate flavour, but the flavour is normally in the head. So we don't chuck it in the bin, we minimise wastage, so we make a stock with the marron bones and roasted fishbones, and then we have some vegetables, saffron and tomatoes and say viola, this is a suquet, Catalan fish soup."

But that's just the base. Santi wanted something with more power. So he decided to add XO sauce. "That's really strong, so from Europe we move to Asia, but with West Australian produce," he says, still travelling the world in his head. "But we need another layer, so we find the chicken. So we cook it sous vide with the chicken fat and we add spices like cardamom and coriander seeds and some fresh grated ginger and

that gives the zesty, peppery flavour that needs to enhance the wine. But now the wine is asking for some floral notes. We find the Geraldton wax that gives a bit of citrusy length in the mouth and then local WA produce closes the circle. And then we try with the wine, and 'bang!'"

As Rob put it, "this outrageous combo would be a cluster" in lesser hands. Santi makes them sing, a symphony of flavours you simply don't want to end. Not one for hyperbole, the chef nonetheless confesses he was rather happy when he created it. "When I tried it the first time I thought 'Yes, this is a nice dish, this is the philosophy, we want to create more dishes like this. This is what we do.'"

What he does has earned him the title of Regional Chef of the Year at *The West Australian* Good Food Guide Awards earlier this week — and helped win Voyager Estate Regional Restaurant of the Year.

It's certainly not something the softly-spoken chef, who turns 40 next month, imagined he'd be doing all those years ago in Spain, however. As a child he only ever saw food as fuel, something to cram in his mouth before running back out the door again to play.

Santi's mum Esther worked in the textile industry and the local fish cannery, while dad Jose Manuel worked in the maritime industry, including stints with a fishing company in Angola that would take him away from home six months of the year. "Then my father came back and opened a restaurant, it was 1987 I think," he recalls. "When I was 13 I started helping in the kitchen, peeling potatoes, doing dishes. I used to hate working in the restaurant, I wasn't interested in food at all."

After primary school, Santi chose a combination of high school and TAFE-like study, though his dream of sailing the high seas didn't eventuate. Santi juggled high school subjects with hospitality, at a school which doubled as a hotel. He was initially less than inspired. "The first few years I didn't pay much attention," he says. "But I had some teachers see something in me and make me appreciate a bit more. And then I started reading some books, and becoming really interested and I say 'Wow, I really like this.'"

As soon as he finished, though, Santi was ready to hit the road. First stop, the tourist mecca of Majorca. "It was a really good income for 19 years old. I learnt a lot more of the basics and did a bit of bakery, pastry, helping me a bit with the more artistic side of things."

With some confidence under his belt, he headed to Paris, where his job in a restaurant on the Champs Elysses was simply paying for his »

## feature

« lessons in a bakery, so the money soon dried up. It was back to Majorca, before a year in the south of Germany, with boutique hotel chain Relais & Chateaux, then on to another of their hotels in the Pyrenees.

“The same company opened another small hotel and offered me position of head chef. If I looked back I probably wouldn’t take that position again, I was only 24 or 25,” he says. “Then I took a really good role in Tristan (Majorca), which at the time was probably in the top 10 restaurants in Spain. I was the only Spanish chef in the kitchen, but my German was much better by then!” (He also speaks Galician, his “first” language, Spanish, Catalan, French, English, “and a bit of Russian but I believe I’m not fluent in any of them”.)

At 26 and one of two head chefs in a two-Michelin star restaurant, he soaked up not just the culinary lessons but the management skills from cooking director Gerhard Schwaiger. The hours were relentless but he embraced the German structure. “I like it the other way to Spain,” he says with a laugh.

After a few years, a customer poached him to a place he’d long had a hankering to visit. By then, Santi had met his now wife Meire, a PE teacher from Brazil who was working as a casual at Tristan. Did she love him enough to trade the sunny climes of Majorca for the biting cold of Russia? “Going to Moscow was good proof! I really loved the job there, it was really exciting, we did three or four openings in one year, but then my wife got pregnant.”

The couple decided to return to Galicia to be near family but it wasn’t the Spain Santi remembered; it seemed to him that the values he had been taught were being lost. “I went to Mexico for this consulting company and the people there were lovely, they don’t have much money but they are so happy and joyful. And then I’d come back to Spain and everyone was grey, grey, grey and talking about crisis.”

The family started weighing up their options. “I suppose when you get a first child as well you become more focused about life and I thought ‘I don’t like it here’. It was a time when you could make a lot of money working in Uzbekistan or countries that required another language for me or my family, but they weren’t really good for family life.”

It was his wife who crystallised things. “She said ‘I think it’s time you start to think about our family, I think you should stay more at home and have maybe two days off, instead of one, and work 10 hours instead of 15 or 16 a day’. And I thought if I kept doing that, there could have been a divorce! This was no time to be selfish, she followed me to Russia!”

They hadn’t even thought of Australia, but when Santi put his CV out into the worldwide web, he was offered a job in, of all places, country Victoria. It wasn’t the high-flying kitchen he was used to but it suited the family just fine, and Santi was very happy to be back by the seaside. “Warrnambool is so nice, but unfortunately the food scene is not the main thing there; I did two years at a bistro and then we thought let’s stay longer, what else can we do.” The family moved to the heart of Victoria’s spa country, Daylesford, where he took up a position as head chef at Sault with a very small team, learning more about



Full of flavour  
Seafood and  
vegetables  
figure  
prominently on  
Santi’s menu.

Australian produce. “It was a really lovely five years and our second daughter was born there, in Ballarat.” (Lara is now 10, while Amanda has just turned four.)

In those years, he travelled a bit on the east coast but his first visit to WA was when he came over to be interviewed for the job at Voyager Estate. “I fell in love, really. With the region first, it is so beautiful, and I’m back to the sea – even if I don’t use it much! – and then the company is amazing. They talked to me about what they wanted to do, moving into organics and reducing the carbon footprint, and growing our own food, it’s just so exciting.”

He was initially unsure about the “wine first” concept. “That was the only rule, they said you can do what you want but the food has to match the wines. I like wine but I wasn’t a big drinker, all my life was more in food. I thought how do I take this and work it to my advantage.”

Santi is a very thoughtful operator. He spent the first few months at Voyager just getting to know everyone and everything, building a picture of where the estate had come from and where it was heading. And that meant really getting to know the wine.

*‘This wine is telling me what to cook ... drinking it and smelling it.’*

After spending a lot of time with the winemakers and sommelier Claire Tonon, he started to hear what the wine was saying. “This wine is telling me what to cook, just drinking it and smelling it. And this massive storm we had a few months ago, that will tell me what to cook in two years time. There is this real connection to the land. More and more it is about the wine, and how can we cook with the soil – and by that I mean everything that grows in the soil.”

Voyager Estate boasts an impressive kitchen garden, with plans to expand into more organic produce. Santi says he was in awe of WA produce from minute one. “I have such respect for farmers, they work really long hours, no holidays, and not a lot of money,” he says. “And they do 50 per cent of my job, because at the end of the day as a chef you don’t have to manipulate too much good produce.”

As he slowly builds on the foundations of Voyager – which, in a nice bit of synergy, also celebrated its 40th birthday this year – Santi says this never-ending journey is all about learning. Learning about the



region. The wines. The climate. The producers. The team. He talks a lot about “Team Voyager”, where the gardeners, the kitchen, the front of house, everyone, helps make the dining experience one of WA’s best.

When we meet he had not long returned from his first collaboration in Perth, with Garum’s Guy Grossi, who he found so easy to work with because he was “not talking as much about himself, there was no ego”. He’d love to do more collaborations, bringing chefs to Voyager Estate, so is very much looking forward to the (sold-out) satellite event Voyager is hosting on November 16 as part of Gourmet Escape. He will work with chefs from two other winery restaurants, Brendan Wessels from d’Arenberg Cube in McLaren Vale and Vince Trim from Hobart’s MONA (Moorilla Estate), to create the “ultimate food and wine dinner”.

Even if things get hot in the kitchen, you won’t catch Santi ranting or raving – he hates that kind of behaviour. “I like rock music, all types of music really, but if I like to picture myself as a chef, I’d like to think I would be more like Leonard Cohen,” he says with a smile. “More mature, chilled, like a fine old wine. Then the message gets to the receptors and creates beauty. He created beauty with words ... and I like to create beauty with food. When you want to be creative you listen to those wise people.”

If Santi is the culinary Cohen, then Meire is his muse. “I give her more than the 50 per cent (credit for his success). I thank my wife a lot for the hours she supports me and how she looks after the kids. I couldn’t do it without her,” he says, happy that his family has found a balance with a restaurant that only does lunch (albeit a full-on degustation) and functions, his hours nothing like those early days. “Luckily, she likes to travel too, so I suppose she’s the perfect partner in crime. If I was with someone from my country town I would probably be stuck there forever, or it would be hard to get away.”

So is the wanderer staying put in WA? “I will still have the accent, but almost from the beginning, I feel like I would like to be a local, and now I’m starting to feel like that,” he says. “I want to create more and more memories for people, to attract more visitors to the region, that helps me find my purpose. I don’t have any more than my primary family here, so if I do a great job I feel like I am more connected, that I bring people together over beautiful food and wine. In Margaret River. By the sea. I really love it.”

See [voyagerestate.com.au](http://voyagerestate.com.au).