



The chef behind WA's best restaurant tells **Julie Hosking** why it's all about the flavours of his home State.

When Jed Gerrard noticed bottlebrush popping up all over the city, like any casual observer, he thought they looked nice. But unlike the casual observer, he was wondering how nice they would be to eat.

"I did a little bit of research and I found out that the local Aboriginals used to soak them in water and make a sweet drink out of them," he says. "I thought about the Middle East and rosewater; they make this super-perfumed water and make sweets with it, and I thought why can't we make bottlebrush water in the same way?"

It took the persistent chef about a month of experimenting to perfect the extraction. "We finally got the flavour that we wanted and we've made it into a sorbet and it's in one of the desserts. The easy thing would have been to buy rosewater and do something with that but it's not the concept of the restaurant."

The restaurant is Wildflower, the jewel in the crown of the gloriously renovated State Buildings. A restaurant that Jed was brought in to help create as part of his role as executive chef for COMO the Treasury. A restaurant that Rob Broadfield recently declared the best in WA, awarding it his highest mark ever, 18.5. A restaurant that couldn't possibly settle for imported rosewater.

"It needs to be native and it has to be original; there's no point in having the concept of the six seasons and you come here and have rosewater, or steak with café de Paris butter and chips, or you just have a vanilla creme brulee. It's not what we're about," Jed explains. "We're about people coming up here and tasting something they haven't tasted – to have a good time with great food and nice wine but

also get a little bit of understanding of WA. We want people who dine here to know exactly where in the world they are and what time of the year it is."

That a boy brought up in Balingup should be passionate about showcasing West Australian ingredients is only fitting. But it is a world of flavour and experience that has led him to this place and point in time. The 33-year-old sips a macchiato from a WA-made cup on the Wildflower terrace overlooking the Swan as he shares his very potted history, one that began in the decidedly earthy Southern Forests.

"It's a very self-sustaining community; people grow their own fruit and veg. We had our own goats that we would milk, we had our own chickens and then, when the rooster was old enough, we'd chop him on the head and Mum would make curry or something. And then Dad would take me fishing along the coast and he would show me how to clean and cook the fish," Jed says. "My mother's also an artist, so I always had that creative outlet."

When his parents split up, he went to New Zealand to be with his dad (brothers Kane and Luke stayed with their mother), and lived with his grandparents who ran a boutique hotel in Invercargill – giving him an early taste for hospitality. He wasn't, however, a fan of school. "I didn't have the attention span; I was just one of those kids who would wag." He came back to WA for high school but left in Year 11. After a stint working in the orchards and planting gum trees, he returned to Invercargill where he was persuaded to study a certificate in cooking. Suddenly, the flame was sparked. "Whereas at school I hated it and didn't want to listen to the teachers, here I'd rock up early and want to listen to everything. I actually got top of my class."

He went to the "Big Smoke" of Christchurch for a couple of years, before moving to Queenstown in search of a new challenge. Then his older brother Kane lured him to Whistler, Canada, with the promise of a snowboarding, beer-drinking working

holiday. Jed started at the best restaurant in town the day after he arrived. "I worked a year and went snowboarding about four times," he says with a laugh. "But I was working with produce I'd never even heard of before: caribou, buffalo, halibut."

With all work and no play he saved enough to travel for nine months. When the funds dried up, he got a job as sous chef at the Spire, a boutique hotel in Queenstown, before heading for Sydney, working at Tetsuya's for six months and landing a gig at the then three-hat Bilson's. Head chef Alfonso Ales had trained at leading Spanish restaurants, Elbulli and Mugaritz, so the world of molecular gastronomy opened up to him. While Jed was there, owner Tony Bilson also brought Michelin-star chefs over to cook their menus, an "amazing experience" that led to a stint at a Michelin-star restaurant in Normandy, France. "As soon as the sun was coming up, we'd go out to and pick up wild garlic and flowers ... and go down to the harbour and meet the fishermen and the chef would just pick out whatever fish he wanted to



State champion Jed at Wildflower. PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

use for that day," Jed says. "The ducks would come in with the feathers still on and the vegetables would come in with the dirt still on them, so it was very earthy, very raw. It gave you a super appreciation of the produce."

After finally getting that snowboarding holiday, Jed secured a job through Teage Ezard at Sydney's Star City Casino just as it was undergoing its \$1 billion transformation to The Star. "That was my first pre-opening experience, I wanted to learn how to run the business, which is just as important, if not more so, than the cooking side of things. Opening a restaurant is a massive undertaking, a lot of hard work, but very rewarding."

Jed's brother was calling him back to WA – this time with the lure of endless surfing – but he was reluctant; he didn't think there were the same kind of opportunities in Perth. Then he heard about the State Buildings. He met Adrian Fini, the developer behind the project and Anneke Brown, the general manager of COMO the Treasury, and was hooked. "When I heard the vision behind the project, the history behind the buildings, what they planned for the restaurants, the whole concept ... it made sense."

Winning such a plum job wasn't simple, though. For the first time he had to go through an extensive auditioning process, something the humble chef is typically grateful for. "It was about four or five

months before they offered me the job, every interview was different, I had to do timelines, concept documents. It was actually really good for me to show I was more than capable of running a business, I'm not just someone who can cook."

He came onboard in January 2015, with responsibility for the hotel's food and beverage, Post restaurant, and Wildflower, which opened late last year. It is clearly a labour of love.

"I can confidently say that 80 per cent of what we serve in Wildflower comes from WA; the other 10 per cent is from Australia and there would be a couple of items from overseas, like a few seasonings from Japan," he says, with pride. "All the vegetables and protein come from WA."

There are problems sourcing, particularly in meeting his own high standards. "Because Wildflower is such a unique concept revolving around the six seasons, finding native ingredients that I can get a consistent supply on the quantity and the quality is really tough. There is an amazing amount of native ingredients out there but not produced on a big enough scale or not produced at all. I don't have a team of guys that just go out and collect things for me like Rene Redzepi at Noma. We have to do it on our days off or in the morning and be really smart about how we do it."

Jed wants people to eat something at Wildflower

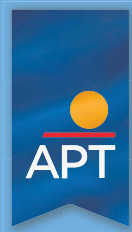
that they love and they just can't get anywhere else. "Like the bottlebrush, or the peppermint tree leaves we use to season the lamb and in the sauce, they're from the South West. We also cook a lot over jarrah."

He waxes lyrical about the Bushfood Factory, near Denmark, which produces some of Wildflower's native ingredients, including three different types of myrtle, Bahen & Co chocolate in Margaret River and the Shark Bay producers who provide their scallops. Jed's also looking north for another WA delicacy.

"I'm going to put pearl meat on the menu in coming weeks that we're getting from Clipper Pearls in Broome. I'm developing a dish with pearl meat and kangaroo, so it's like a true West Australian surf 'n' turf," he says, with a laugh. "I'm getting my head around that so it's really approachable to guests, so they don't just go 'This is too weird'."

The main thing is to champion WA, from the Wheatbelt flour for their bread to the beautiful crockery Jed helped develop specially for Wildflower and Post with local ceramicist Melanie Sharpham from Eucalypt Homewares. "If I'm not doing that, I'm not doing my job properly." ■

Jed Gerrard is creating a Local Origins menu at Vasse Felix with Aaron Carr and Paul Iskov, on Friday at Margaret River Gourmet Escape. See gourmetescape.com.au.



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