

WORDS JULIE HOSKING PICTURES IAIN GILLESPIE

# Sweet SPOT

This baker has gone through some tough times but nothing makes him happier than the joy his cakes bring.

**P**aul Skinner had a dream. He had been hunting bargains at auction houses for years, buying equipment and storing it in friends' garages, in the hope it might come true.

Then one day he was driving around his old stamping ground, where he lived after arriving on a Greyhound bus from Adelaide as a 20 year old, when he spied a shop in Tuart Hill he had visited years before.

"The owner had passed away and someone had taken all the equipment away to set up elsewhere. There was nothing in it. I remember peering through the windows," he says. "I've got a picture of the 'for lease' sign that was on the window. It was cheap so we thought let's do it."

He and wife Sharon had to sell their house and go back to renting to get enough money – "I think it was about \$10,000" – to cover the set-up. "I've got a picture of Lauren in a pram at the back door of the shop, she was about six months old and the shop is completely empty, just tiles, the big hood and nothing else."

Fast forward 20 years and that little shop is a hive of activity from 6am every Tuesday to Saturday, where butter, cream, chocolate, fruit, nuts, syrup and other wonderfully wicked combinations are whipped into decadent cakes and mouth-watering pastries. And baby Lauren is now a 21-year-old newly minted pastry chef helping her dad – "she's pretty good at decorating and glazing" – and right-hand "wonder woman" Kylie Johnson create them in the kitchen of Ruby's Patisserie.

"I remember thinking four or five years and I'll be rich and that will be that," Paul recalls with a laugh. "I never would have guessed I would have been there for so long. I've been going to the same place for 20 years!"

Talking about it over coffee at Raymond's Cafe next door, he can hardly believe how quickly that

time has flown. Then again, it seems like yesterday he was the only boy in the home economics class at his Adelaide high school, savouring every lesson. "Everyone chose metalwork, plastics or woodwork. I chose home economics and I got straight As. I still have my report cards, I just loved it. I'm really lucky, I knew what I wanted to do."

Although he did get off to a rocky start. He had planned to follow his older brother into the navy and was two days off signing on the dotted line when he got cold feet. "I wasn't getting on with the folks and I didn't want to go to the navy so me and my friend jumped on a train and went to Sydney," he says. "I don't know how we did it but we got a flat and I started work at Parramatta McDonald's. I was 15 and I loved it. It was really good back then because it gave me all the systems and training."

He stayed for nine months before hitching back to Adelaide, where he started a job at Aunt Nellie's Pantry. "They were a bit like Miss Maud's, though not as big. We were cooking banana bread, quiches, zucchini loaf, carrot cakes, good home-style cooking."

But he was getting itchy feet so when his girlfriend's grandparents came back from a holiday in Perth singing its praises, they took the leap, arriving in Hay Street with a few bags and little idea of what would come next. Paul picked up work at the Subiaco Hotel before moving to the then popular Orchard Hotel to work on banquets.

"This is the game changer. They had a guy called Jimmy Ho they brought over from Singapore," Paul recalls. "I remember them saying they were going to open up a pastry shop outside the hotel and I put my hand up to help. I got to be pastry chef assistant and that was the start of it. Jimmy was a superstar, he won all the awards and everyone looked up to him."

Discovering a passion for desserts, young Paul was keen to put in the extra unpaid hours to learn from a master. "I haven't seen him for years but he was a great pastry chef who taught me so much. He used to say the only way you're going to get better is to stay back, stay back, no pay. Seven till three, then hang around till eight or nine at night and then he'd start carving and things like that. He was awesome."

They started supplying places all over town,







**Happy birthday**  
Pastry chef Paul Skinner, with daughter Lauren and right-hand “wonder woman” Kylie Johnson, is celebrating 20 years in business.

which gave Paul the idea that perhaps one day he might do the same thing in his own place. It would take many more years, working at the likes of the Hilton, Fraser’s, the Mercure and the Radisson, before he finally took that leap.

He started with a van, a few assurances from hotels like the Esplanade that they would take his cakes, and a great work ethic. “No one came to the shop as a retail shop. We had horrible little curtains out the front, poo brown colour inside,” he says. “So we just kept pumping the wholesale out. I’ve got all the archive boxes and the old delivery books are in them. When the Hyatt rang me about eight months ago asking if we’d supply them, I thought I better go back and look at what I was charging, and there were all these places, some I couldn’t even remember going to! We were supplying the Radisson, the Langley, the Esplanade, the Mercure, the Hotel Grand Chancellor ... We were turning over massive amounts, that got us going and allowed me to buy some more equipment, but it was killing me.”

The plan had been for Sharon, a registered nurse, to work with Paul in the shop but that didn’t last long. “Then there were the kids (18-year-old Brendan, who is studying media and filmmaking, earns extra cash helping out in the shop) to look after, and she was working part-time at HBF,” he says. “But she was awesome in helping set up this business and she ran the books perfectly.”

Paul had a mate helping out, and within a year was joined by Kylie, who he had worked with at the Hilton. “We’ve had about two fights and they’ve both been my fault! She’s got an amazing temperament, she’s a country girl who works hard from the time she gets in to the time she goes home, she will not stop. I would not have survived without her. She’s been a rock.”

As retail slowly started to pick up, they spent a little doing up the shopfront and started to scale back the wholesale which, aside from the strain of cooking and delivering all over town, was stifling creativity.

“The sort of cakes the hotels wanted weren’t the kind of cakes we’re making now. They were low buffet cakes, churning out stuff, and I just got tired of making it,” Paul says. “We were doing that for about nine or 10 years, massive hours, 6am to 6pm. »



# feature



Little baked cheesecakes.



Lime tarts.



Custard horns.

« I remember Christmas Day I was so tired from working Christmas Eve we'd go to a rellie's house and I'd be asleep until about 2 o'clock.»

Paul knew he had to cut back, so he decided to focus on the retail, and just supply one place. "I moved into more of the French style, the things I wanted to make, a bit fancier."

Special occasion cakes such as the Fraisier, a light and luscious combination of sponge, strawberry liquor and creamy bavarois; or the Opera, with delicate layers of sponge, coffee buttercream and chocolate ganache. Or sweet treats for one, such as the sublime lemon tarts and a vanilla slice that melts in your mouth and that he dare not take off the menu – "we'd go out of business!" Then there's the strawberry shortcake, a combination of sponge, custard and fresh strawberries wrapped in chocolate and decorated with more berries and shards of chocolate.

"That's phenomenal, probably about 60 per cent of the cakes we sell across the board are strawberry shortcakes. The Italian customers, they come in and go 'I want a torta, we had that strawberry shortcake last time', and I go 'well try something different, how about this one' and they go 'Ohhh, I'll go with the strawberry shortcake'. It's funny."

Like all small businesses, Ruby's Patisserie has been through its ups and downs. With the downturn in the economy, lately there's been more downs than

ups, so much so Paul did toy with the idea of walking away from it all about six months ago.

"I said to the guys 'that's it, I'm going to sell it, I'm not going to change my mind'," he says. "I think it was a Friday or Saturday, I went home, looked at Seek, looked at businesses for sale, and then thought 'no, no'. It would have been a bad decision, one out of a bad place where, I don't know, you're not feeling that sense of accomplishment or you're tired or whatever."

In some ways Ruby's was a victim of its own success. Not that long ago the shop would have a full front counter, with three trays of back-ups, and they would still run out. And they were so busy with bookings for special occasion cakes they had to turn away customers. "There was a time when we were booked out for the whole year," he says. "We'd have to put it up a sign every Tuesday saying we couldn't do any more cakes, mostly birthday cakes. We were turning away about four or five people a week – and they were disappointed – because physically we couldn't do them. I still get people now ringing and say we have to order a cake for September, is it too late and I'm like no, bring it on."

While he doesn't quite hanker for those days, "they were crazy times", he misses the buzz that the busyness brings. "That drove me as well – the happy faces. They've come in so many times you want to give them something different. It makes you creative

and interested. It's a big driver and you don't realise how much it is until it's gone."

Paul is back supplying regular orders to the Hyatt – 150 fruit tarts here, 400 sticky date puddings there – to help supplement the downturn in retail but despite the headaches of running a small business, one not helped these past few weeks by an ongoing battle with Telstra over the NBN, the 53-year-old can't imagine doing anything else.

He reckons he's made hundreds of thousands of cakes. "I have a favourite style, modern – so no black forest cake! – but uncomplicated. Just really well made, made with love. I get inspiration from everywhere. See that bottle over there," he says pointing to a vase on a table in the delightfully retro Raymond's, "the shape of that, that might give me an idea."

Paul is heading off to Sydney this week for a spur-of-the-moment break with his son ("taking time off is never easy"), and is hoping to return with renewed passion, to get stuck back into what he does best – creating something sweet for others to savour.

"I'm going to look at some cake shops while I'm there for sure, I usually come back a bit charged up," he says. "I still love what I do, absolutely. I won't say I like the recognition for me, but I love the recognition for the shop. When people say they were recommended to come here, I love that." [www.rubyspatisserie.com.au](http://www.rubyspatisserie.com.au)



Paul with a birthday cake.



Kylie and Paul's son Brendan get on with prep.



Daughter Lauren with some sweet tarts.