



Piscatorial paradise

Jane Hutchinson witnesses the genesis of a restaurant destined to raise the bar for Melbourne's seafood scene.

DONOVAN Cooke can't remember the last time he had a decent night's sleep. For months now, after each 15-hour (or more) working day, he has collapsed into bed waiting for the sweet relief of sleep. But instead the one-time enfant terrible of Melbourne fine dining lies awake, his mind churning over every detail of his soon-to-open restaurant — an ambitious 300-seat seafood temple.

"I don't sleep much," the 42-year-old Yorkshireman says with a grin. "I go to bed and wake up thinking what needs to be done, what have I missed, what do I need to chase up in the morning."

A few weeks ago he woke with a start, panicking about a text message from business partner Hatem Saleh, informing him that the custom-built, nine-metre-long stove he'd ordered from Canada wouldn't fit in the restaurant's kitchen. "I got out of bed to check my phone, but there was no message. It was just a bad dream — the stove is fine. My wife says she's going to move into the spare room because all I do is mutter about the restaurant in my sleep."

It's been seven years since Cooke's name was last tied to a big-name Melbourne restaurant, and the stakes are high. Back then he was head chef and co-owner, with then-wife Philippa Sibley, of Ondine — arguably the city's most acclaimed fine diner. At 35, Cooke had already honed his skills with the legendary Michel Roux and Marco Pierre White in England, headed the kitchen at the Michelin-starred La Cote St Jacques in France, and launched some of Melbourne's most talked-about eateries, Luxe and est est est.

Renowned for his technical brilliance, unrelenting perfectionism and occasionally fiery temper, he was anointed *The Age Good Food Guide's* joint chef of the year — with Sibley — in September 2004. When Ondine closed suddenly just three months later, it sent a tremor through the city's food cognoscenti, prompting some pundits to pronounce the death of fine dining.

Of course, fine dining survived, but Cooke disappeared, decamping to Hong Kong. Now he's back with a bang, lured by the prospect of overseeing the biggest, brashest seafood restaurant this city has seen.

Cooke has taken on the mantle of executive chef, as well as a significant financial stake, at the Atlantic — the latest star in Crown's expanding constellation of dining destinations, which includes Gordon Ramsay's Maze, Neil Perry's Rockpool and Nobu. Occupying a vast 1000-square-metre riverfront site, once home to Waterfront and neighbouring Cafe Greco, The Atlantic is the brainchild of events entrepreneur Hatem Saleh, wholesale seafood don Con Andronis, and building magnate Tony Schiavello — the triumvirate behind the Atlantic Group that has colonised Docklands' Central Pier. Although the partners won't divulge the size of their investment, it's clear they've spared no expense to create a dining destination with plenty of wow factor — from the custom-designed rugs to the bespoke stove complete with five induction cooktops, thermo-circulators and a wood-fired grill.

When the Atlantic opens on March 14, it looks set to up the ante on Melbourne's long-lamented lacklustre seafood dining scene. Boasting

a 60-seat oyster bar, open daily until 2am, a state-of-the-art open kitchen with a second preparation kitchen and coldroom below, an exclusive chef's table and a coterie of private dining areas, the restaurant will celebrate an "ocean to plate" ethos via twice-daily deliveries of the freshest sustainable seafood from around the country. It helps that one of the partners is Melbourne's self-described "King Neptune", Con Andronis, whose Clamms wholesale seafood juggernaut supplies more than 800 eateries around town.

Each day at 6am, Cooke will receive an SMS alerting him to what's best at the seafood markets. By 11am he'll have written the day's menu, according to what arrived just hours earlier. "We'll have live crustaceans coming in twice a day — once in the morning and again for night service. We can take live mussels from seawater tanks downstairs and straight up to the kitchen. We'll have seafood platters, but they'll be completely different. We'll change things every day depending on what's running. We'll never resort to frozen lines."

This piscatorial bounty will be on display in an eight-metre-long glass-walled coldroom, visible to diners as well as passersby on the Crown concourse. "Melbourne doesn't have a big seafood market open to the public, as Sydney does," explains Saleh, "so we wanted to give everyone that experience. Everything that's on the menu will be on display, and we'll have a chef working at one end demonstrating how it's prepared. It will provide a bit of theatre."

The restaurant will comprise three discrete areas. Just beyond the



entrance will be a casual oyster bar where customers can drop in any time for a glass of champagne and some freshly shucked oysters — four to six varieties on offer every day. Or perhaps an ounce or two of caviar or a yakitori skewer of bug tail or salmon belly. Downstairs is a moody New York-style bar, the Den, complete with baby grand piano, graffiti wall and premium drinks list.

In the main dining room the emphasis will be on whole fish,

cooked simply over the wood-fired grill. But Cooke's state-of-the-art kitchen will allow him to flex his cheffy muscles with the likes of house-smoked steamed wild barramundi, or his signature olive oil confit of salmon with blood-orange reduction, carrot, radish and ginger. And, naturally, there's a lavish eight-course chef's tasting menu. "The kitchen has been custom-designed for me," says Cooke. "I can cook fish any way you can think of: steamed,

grilled, braised, barbecued, roasted, fried. I can vacuum-cook crayfish at 50 degrees in fat rendered from Iberian ham to create something that is completely different."

The mood of the enterprise is captured in edgy, industrial finishes, seascape colour schemes and bespoke netted chandeliers.

"We wanted to evoke the feel and atmosphere of the old seafood



We want that industrial, seafront atmosphere.

HATEM SALEH. The Atlantic co-owner





markets in New York and Chicago,” explains Saleh, who, along with interior design firm Blackmilk, has overseen much of the design detail. “We want that industrial, raw, sea-front atmosphere,” he says, pointing to glimpses of dark stone, distressed wood and turquoise paintwork behind the building works.

Slatted screens and tempered glass wine walls have been artfully placed in the 300-seat dining area to create several smaller spaces. While every table will get a clear view of the open kitchen, there’s no seat in the restaurant where diners will be able to see the whole room.

Last March, Saleh, Andronis and their interior designer Conrad Manolidis spent four weeks trawling the restaurants and bars of China, New York, London and Germany, searching for inspiration, hand-picking furnishings and flat-wear to bring their vision to life. “We went to 40 restaurants in New York and 25 in London,” says Saleh. “We got inspiration from everywhere, from steel extrusions on a New York shopfront, the bluestone floors at a hotels, even the bathroom door handles on the way to a restaurant men’s room.”

A year on, the carefully selected fittings and fixtures are arriving from around the world: plates from Japan

and Spain, steak knives from France, cutlery from Britain, chairs from Italy. There’s a retro gramophone Saleh found in a shop in Shanghai waiting to go into the Den, and the netted chandeliers, more than four months in the making, are being finished by local artisans. Male staff uniforms, coming from Egypt, have been delayed by the recent turmoil.

The partners seem unfazed by this hitch in their mammoth logistical undertaking. But Cooke points out that it’s not over yet. “It never stops,” he says. “It’s one thing doing all the planning and everything, but until you get in there you don’t know how it’s going to work.”

Having just finalised his menus, Cooke will spend the last few days leading to opening night “in lockdown” with his 34 hand-picked kitchen staff — eight of whom, including head chef Tam Kin Pak, have followed him from Hong Kong. “We’ll be practising, practising, practising, cleaning and unpacking.” When he says, “I’m going to send my wife and kids away for six weeks, so I can sleep here”, it’s not certain he’s joking.

Still, for all the stress and sleepless nights, Cooke insists he has no qualms about launching another high-profile restaurant just a few

blocks from the ill-fated Ondine. He says that restaurant closed as much for personal reasons as anything else (he and Sibley split about the time Ondine shut) and insists he’s always wanted to come back. “It just had to be for the right opportunity.” When Adronis, an old contact from his days at est est est and Ondine, flew to Hong Kong in September 2009 to sound out his interest, he jumped at the chance. “I virtually made the decision on the spot. I think it’s really exciting. Melbourne has been crying out for a place like this.”

His only reservation, he jokes, is about working in the open kitchen, smack in the centre of the restaurant. Not known for his quiet, retiring manner — one Melbourne journalist labelled him a “kitchen psycho” — the excitable chef could provide some interesting but unintended dinner-time theatre. “I’ve never worked in an open kitchen before,” he grimaces. “Luckily there’s a sound-proof lift in the kitchen. I could be spending a lot of time in there.

“But at the end of the day, everyone knows there’s a lot of duress in the kitchen,” he says, suddenly serious. “I don’t think anyone really minds how the food gets there, as long as it’s excellent.”



Clockwise, from left: Donovan Cooke now, and in his est est est days; the restaurant space before work began; black mussels, aromatic vegetables and basil; Japanese-inspired wakame.