



You are here: | [Home](#) | Food

Simplicity: a winning recipe

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From a young surfer with a taste for fresh seafood to top chef in the best restaurant in the world, Beau Clugston's passion for Australian native ingredients has taken him around the world.

Tags

[Food](#)





Australian chef Beau Clugston's career has come full circle, although he never really expected life to turn out that way.

It all began in his hometown of Sawtell, on the New South Wales coast, where he spent as much time as possible out surfing and was instinctively drawn to fresh, natural food.

"I grew up around food but in a wild way," he says. "We would go spear fishing and chip oysters off railway bridges and then, after early morning surfs, everyone would come back to my place and I'd man the barbeque."

But it was his passion for surfing that led him to an apprenticeship in the restaurant world, as the hours allowed him to spend mornings out on the waves, and this soon gave way to a deep love of cooking.

From Coffs Harbour to Copenhagen

After two years as an apprentice in Coffs Harbour and another two years learning from Greg Doyle at his iconic Sydney restaurant, Pier, Clugston decided to expand his horizons and head overseas. He spent five years working for Gordon Ramsay in London learning what he describes as "the foundations and building blocks of cooking" and was poised to return to Australia when he decided to make a pilgrimage that changed his life.

Although it was not widely known outside the food world back in 2009, chef circles were buzzing with excitement about an innovative new restaurant in Copenhagen called Noma and Clugston was eager to check it out for himself.

"I thought I'd just quickly go there for lunch before I headed home to Australia, but it shook up my whole world," says Clugston.

"It was so pure and clean, and it took me back to how I like to cook and eat. It made me realise I knew nothing about cooking and everything I'd been taught and was doing was so far behind. I knew then I would do anything to work there."

This was just prior to Noma being named Best Restaurant in the World (which it managed to do three years in a row, then again in 2014), and before chef René Redzepi was internationally recognised as a culinary hero,

making reservations almost impossible to secure.

Back then, the restaurant had only eight hardworking chefs and was sometimes only half full at meal times. But Clugston knew they were doing something special and he was determined to be part of it.



Cooking up Australian success

Clugston was persistent. He took to turning up at the kitchen door and politely asking for a job; eventually Redzepi agreed to a one-week trial. The one-week trial turned into seven years. Clugston worked his way up from a line cook to working alongside Redzepi and one other chef in the hallowed test kitchen.

“In the years I was there, Noma changed so much,” he says. “It always felt one step ahead and was focused on using pure flavours, nothing muddled.”

The pinnacle of Clugston's time at Noma came in 2015 when it was announced the restaurant would host a pop up in Sydney in early 2016. To prepare for the venture, Clugston was charged with creating the itinerary for the epic 10-week exploratory journey around Australia, broken into three parts – for himself, Redzepi and one other chef.

The goal of the trip was to source native ingredients they could use in the pop up restaurant but, more so, it was a search for inspiration and for what Clugston calls “the very essence of Australia”.

“We did the whole of Australia, up to the top of Arnhem Land hunting water buffalo and wild camels, then down to Tasmania, and to the mountains,” he says. “We did it all and it was really special.”

The journey around the country provided the team with the basis for their new dishes, but also turned out to be the closing of the culinary circle for Clugston.

Clugston returned as an experienced chef to the clean, fresh, honest flavours of his homeland that he had loved so much as a young surfer, although now he was going deeper and discovering the true breadth and depth of what he calls the native Australian “pantry”.

“Noma chose Australia because it has a whole range of ingredients that you can’t get or taste anywhere else, so it’s almost like going to the moon,” Clugston says.

“It made me realise I was quite naïve about it all. We had all this beauty in Australia and all these amazing products but when I was cooking here in Australia I never explored it. It took a Dane taking me back to Australia to open my eyes and appreciate what is there.”



Simplicity with a little kick

Soon after the wildly successful pop up closed in Sydney, Clugston decided it was again time for him to spread his wings, this time to Paris. He took over the burners at the small but highly respected Le 6 Paul Bert in Paris’ 11th arrondissement, alongside fellow Noma alumnus Emil Glaser. Clugston used it as a chance to develop his own style, which he describes as “simplicity with a little kick”.

His dishes included an almost deceptively simple plate of kiwi fruit and avocado lightly dressed in koji, a sweetly fragrant fermented mould that Clugston says gave the dish “an almost meaty richness”, and a delicate bowl of raw squid swimming in pink peppercorn oil and topped with a spoonful of finger lime ‘caviar’ sourced from a citrus grower in the south of France.

The menu earned him widespread fame, but Copenhagen called him back and he is now working on an exciting new soon-to-be-announced project there.



He plans to head back to Australia eventually (“maybe in about five years”) and has his sights set on creating the perfect beachside café, or maybe a charming little 20-seat fine dining restaurant by the harbour in Sydney.

Wherever he ends up, the one certainty is that he will remain true to his lifelong passion for simple, beautiful food.

“I really learned that you can stick with absolute simplicity if you pick the right ingredients, if you put a bit of love and a couple of drops of magic on it,” he says.

“Simplicity always wins for me.”