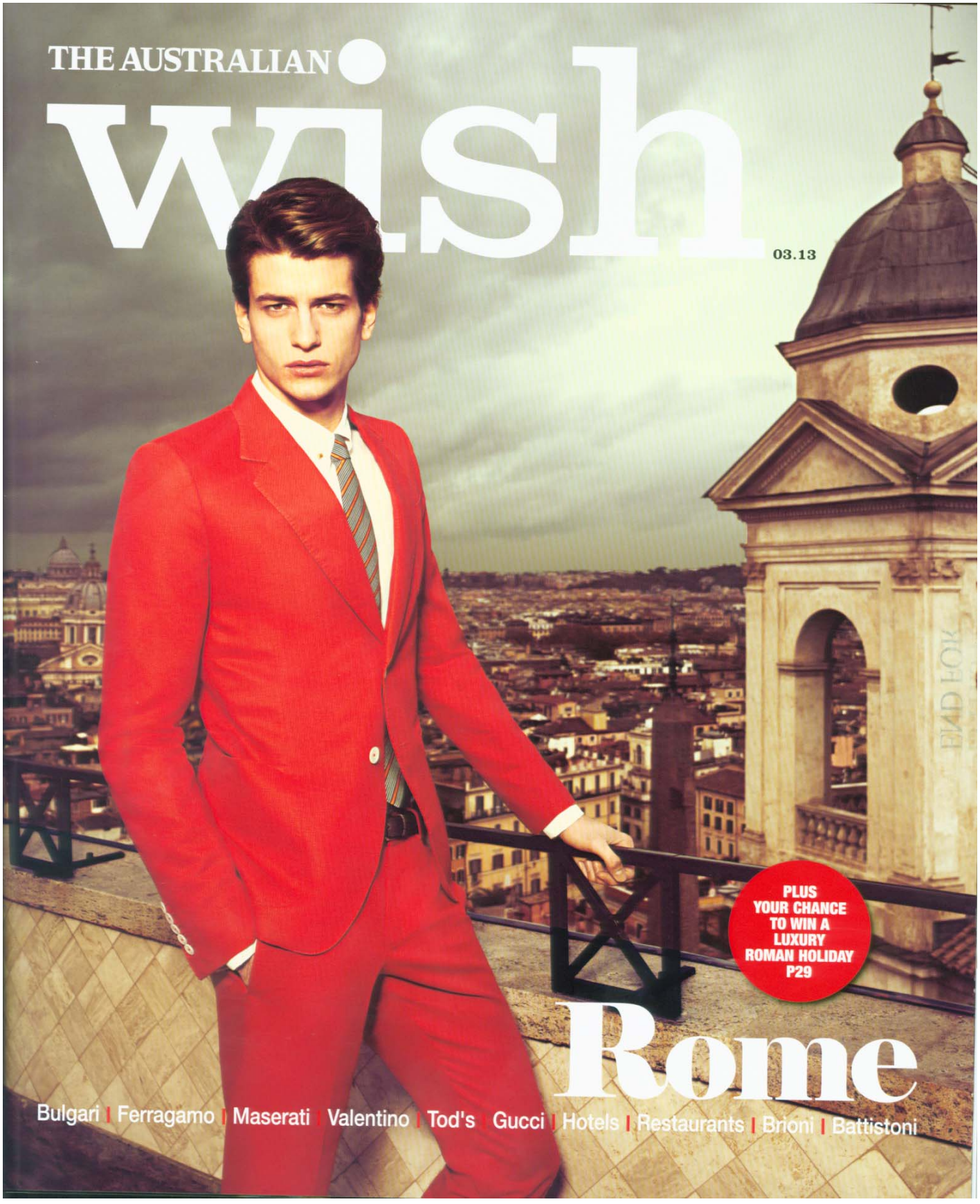
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Wild ride to heritage fare

Stefano Manfredi has helped change the way Australians eat but he believes we still have a way to go

Stefano Manfredi in his restaurant, Balla, at The Star casino in Sydney

Stefano Manfredi vividly recalls his mother stepping out of a shop in her newly adopted home of Australia, grinning broadly as she clutched a package of horsemeat. It was 1961 and he was six years old — his family, from Gottolengo in Italy's Lombardy region, were reeling at the paucity of ingredients they'd taken for granted in Italy, and what passed for a decent meal in Australia.

Their introduction to Aussie "tucker" had been Melbourne's Bonegilla migrant hostel where, just a couple of years before the family's arrival, the dining hall had been burned down by irate Italian residents in protest at the food.

"I can still smell the boiled mutton," says Manfredi.

Months later, after moving to Sydney, his mother's discovery of horsemeat would offer the Manfredi family's first glimmer of culinary hope. "My mother was so excited because she'd never seen horsemeat [sold in Australia] before," says Manfredi. "She'd had to buy it at a pet shop … because it was deemed unsuitable for human consumption. She took it home, cut it up, added her chemist-bought olive oil — the chemist was the only place you could buy it then, because Australians only used olive oil to put in their ears — and made a fantastic carpaccio."

The lack of a food culture in 1960s Australia would turn out to be a blessing for Manfredi, who brought with him the work ethic and determination of many Italian immigrants, and a fervent desire to introduce Australians to real Italian food — not the soggy spaghetti and red sauce that was popular in the day.

Today, Manfredi is one of Australia's most celebrated Italian chefs, with two successful restaurants — Balla in Sydney and Manfredi at Bells on the NSW central coast — a string of cookbooks, a newspaper food column and his own coffee line, Espresso di Manfredi, to his name.

A succession of talented young cooks — Matt Moran, Nino Zoccali and Sean Moran among them — have passed through his kitchen and gone on to open their own successful Mediterranean-influenced restaurants.

"I look at what Australians ate [in the 1960s] and what we eat now and it is completely different," says Manfredi, at his 160-seat restaurant Balla in Sydney's The Star casino complex. "I like to think I have had a part in changing people's attitudes to the way they eat."

Manfredi had no formal training; his cooking skills were learned from his mother and grandmother, hanging around the kitchen and "taking an interest". His mother, Franca, was a partner in his first venture, The Restaurant, which the 26-year-old opened in Sydney's Ultimo in 1983. It would be a revelation for Sydneysiders used to a more formal version of Italian cuisine.

"I was interested in what was going on in Italy, in people like [chefs] Gualtiero Marchesi and Angelo Paracucchi. Unlike France, Italy does not have a haute cuisine; it is basically traditional, local, regional food. I wanted to modernise my family's cooking and bring it into the new era, as exemplified by my heroes in Italy."

Enter hitherto unseen dishes such as chargrilled octopus, pumpkin tortelli, veal kidneys in red wine, garlic and parsley. And polenta. "I remember my mother saying to me, 'No, Stefano, we can't put polenta on the menu — it's for poor people, I will be ashamed'; but we did polenta with duck salmi, braised in spices and red wine. It was one of my favourite things growing up."

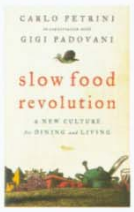
The punters loved it, and The Restaurant went on to become the only Italian establishment in Sydney to earn three hats in the local food guide. "We built up a loyal clientele who really liked that we were doing Italian food that wasn't done by anyone else," he says.

Trends such as dude food, shared plates and reinvented street food don't faze Manfredi. "Whatever you see happening has kind of happened already in Italy," he says. "We do street food here [at Balla]. We've got a chickpea pancake with shaved pecorino — it's Florentine street food. We've got a tripe salad — street food from Piedmonte. Shared plates are part of the Italian culture."

That such exotic offerings should be on Australian menus would have seemed beyond the realms of possibility for the Manfredi family in the grim 60s. But this enduring chef believes there's still a way to go when it comes to a culinary coming of age for his adopted home. Particularly when it comes to the controversial issue of horsemeat.

"It's now legal to eat horsemeat in Australia, but people just don't want to do it," he says. "I would love to serve it on Melbourne Cup Day. And we will only truly grow up as a food culture when we are able to do that."

Stefano Manfredi's favourite Italian cookbooks



Slow Food Revolution: A New Culture for Eating and Living/ Carlo Petrini in Conversation with Gigi Padovani (Rizzoli Editore, 2006)

The popular history is that Slow Food started as a reaction to the opening of a McDonald's franchise near the Spanish Steps in Rome. In truth, it began much earlier, according to Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini — as early as 1949. This conversation between Petrini and food writer Gigi Padovani highlights how seemingly small community actions can affect change globally. It's a book that I keep revisiting because it speaks about a philosophy of food that values and protects agricultural heritage.

La Mia Nuova Grande Cucina Italiana, Gualtiero Marchesi (Rizzoli Editore, Milano, 1980)

When this was published I was still developing my skills in Sydney restaurants. At the time the fashion was French "nouvelle cuisine". Italian food was static. This book gave it a kick-start, though Marchesi the chef had been working towards it for years. His book was a big influence for me in developing the dishes I'd grown up with for the menu at my first restaurant. I still refer to the yellowing pages of the original first edition.

Gambero Rosso Italian Wines 2013 (Gambero Rosso Editore, Roma)

The rise of Italian quality wine over the past 30 years has been phenomenal. Gambero Rosso's *Vini d'Italia* was first published in 1987 with commentary by wine expert Daniele Cernilli and Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini. It's a guide to the wines of the most diverse winemaking country. There are more grape varieties, more styles — and more confusion surrounding them — than anywhere else in the world. This guide — now translated into English — has been my reference over the years.