

FEIDEL DREAMS

In the affluent Melbourne suburb of South Yarra, French-inspired Le Grand Cirque opened its doors earlier this year with celebrity chef **Manu Feidel** at the helm. The restaurant closed after just four months, but Feidel's enthusiasm remains undimmed, says Jacklyn Lloyd >



Manu Feidel ran away from the circus to follow his destiny to become a top chef

Feidel's cuisine showcases the homeliness of French cooking and includes a variety of shared dishes

Manu Feidel's French accent can melt hearts, however it's his no apologies, decadent French cooking that has made him a successful chef, restaurant entrepreneur, author and well-known television personality.

Feidel's culinary path seems set in stone. In France his great grandfather was a pastry chef, and his grandfather and father were also chefs. "I had a happy childhood; there was just my sister, my mum and me. My mum worked hard to provide for us – even then early memories revolve around food and the meals we would share," Feidel recalls. "I wanted to be in the circus and although I enjoyed food, I never had a passion for it until I started to work with my father in the kitchen."

But join the circus he did. "I wanted to be a clown and had a real love for the circus and entertainment," he says. Not wanting to quash Feidel's aspirations, his mother stepped in. "She was always supportive and helpful. She found a local circus school and let me attend."

But eventually Manu Feidel felt the kitchens of the world calling. "I wanted to see the world and travel. London seemed like a good place to start. I arrived at 18 years of age and not speaking a word of English. I worked at Café Royal and then many other establishments until I ended up at Livebait in central London.

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Soon Feidel's itchy feet made him move further afield as Australia beckoned. "In London I worked with many Aussies who told me about how great Australia was. It seemed like the land of sunshine and my enthusiasm for travelling took hold again."

Successfully launching L'étoile in Sydney in 2009, Feidel closed that restaurant earlier this year and moved to Melbourne to "put all my dreams under one roof". "I started my Australian food career in Melbourne (at Toofey's under the guidance of chef Michael Bacash), so I've always wanted to return and open a restaurant there one day," he said.

In 2014 Feidel opened up Le Grand Cirque in Melbourne, a restaurant closer to his French roots. "Le Grand Cirque is not a traditional French restaurant or bistro – that's what I've always strived for in the past but I don't

think it's what diners want," he said at the time.

Unfortunately, Feidel and his business partners at Made Establishment (successful for Press Club, Gazi and Hellenic Republic) closed Le Grande Cirque in August after only four months of operating. It was a difficult decision for the team, but ultimately the business wasn't as successful as anticipated – the figures simply weren't adding up.

In an official press release on the closure, Feidel explained: "Le Grande Cirque was a long-held dream come true for me. I've loved every minute of it." He went on to thank all who supported his dream, including his staff, family and friends.

Shared vision

Despite the restaurant's closure, the vision for Le Grand Cirque was to offer diners a different approach to French cuisine. To echo

the perceived homeliness of French cooking, Feidel liked the idea of people sharing their food. "I am always tempted to try what's on other people's plates – so shared plates were a great concept."

Prior to opening Le Grande Cirque, Feidel searched for a space that would facilitate his needs. "Architects don't understand the practicalities of a kitchen, so I redesigned the kitchen at Le Grand Cirque to fit with the way I was going to run the food service. If it had been left as designed by the architects some of the equipment would have been in the wrong place."

Chef's view of kitchen design

Unable to have a hand in the design of his Sydney kitchen, Feidel says: "L'étoile's kitchen was a fifth of the size of Le Grand Cirque's." During his time working at Restaurant Seven in Sydney, Feidel was inspired for future kitchen

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designs. "I would incorporate an island stove within an open kitchen and good extraction. I would also remove the legs from all equipment and incorporate a concrete slab to seal the underneath. Why? So all the food dropped doesn't get lost underneath and need to be cleaned out."

Having recently completed my chef's qualifications specialising in French cooking, I agree with Feidel's thoughts

on kitchen design. However, I feel slightly uncomfortable asking a French chef how he feels about technology and cooking, particularly when it comes to equipment. Almost anticipating his reply, Feidel confirms that combi-ovens and old-fashioned ranges are his preference. "I haven't had the chance to experiment with induction." He does welcome some new gadgets though, praising sous-vide baths.

In keeping with tradition, Feidel is currently an ambassador for Scholtès, and Chasseur – famous for their cast iron products in the Champagne Ardennes region in France. "I think very carefully before putting my name to any products and both of these were a natural fit for me. I've used Chasseur in kitchens since I've been cooking and think their products are great. Scholtès were introduced to me a few years ago and I was amazed by the efficiency of their equipment especially the Multiplo (cooker) – they are so versatile!"

In addition to being a brand ambassador, Feidel's also written three books: *Manu's French Kitchen*, *Manu's French Bistro* and *French For Everyone*. "I don't want my cookbooks to stay on the shelf. I want to encourage people to cook and learn that French cooking doesn't have to be complicated or take hours."

I ask Feidel what words of encouragement he might have for budding chefs, home

cooks or entrepreneurs, based on his experience and travel. "You always come across a failure before a success, that's the way you keep grounded." Simple, but fair.

End of a dream – for now

Keeping grounded is necessary when Feidel juggles so many responsibilities. "There is always something happening in my life. I'm off to France soon for some more filming for *My France* (his television series)." Feidel acknowledges that free time is something he only fondly remembers. "Downtime? What is this downtime? Any free time I have is spent with my son or sleeping."

Despite travelling all over the world, Feidel is still a true Frenchman at heart, who doesn't blink at fad diets – butter and indulgence are necessary ingredients for a happy life. "Moderation yes, healthy eating as such, no!" he declares.

Feidel's cooking has evolved over the years as he has travelled the world. "For many years I wanted to work in fine-dining restaurants, it was my passion. I still love this style of dining but feel I've grown further away from this. I've become more accepting and less aggressive in the kitchen and feel this is reflected in my food too." While the doors of his Melbourne restaurant may have closed, you get the impression that Feidel will continue to live his dream. There is plenty more yet to come from Feidel. ■