

HOME

at last

One of the country's best chefs, Melbourne-born and bred Luke Mangan has opened restaurants all over the world. Now it's finally our turn

WORDS MARIANNE BETTS

LUKE Mangan has conquered land, sea and air ... next stop Melbourne. One of Australia's best-known chefs, Mangan is about to set up shop in his home town.

His new restaurant, The Palace, which will offer modern pub-style food, will open in South Melbourne later this month.

He already owns a handful of restaurants — Glass in Sydney, Salt and the World Wine Bar in Tokyo, South in San Francisco, Salt Grill on a P&O Cruises liner and he does meals on billionaire businessman Richard Branson's airline Virgin America.

On this night he is celebrating a new deal to provide meals to international business-class passengers on V Australia, by hosting a meal at Glass, for Branson, along with a handful of celebrities and food journalists.

Mangan, 39, and Branson first crossed paths at his first restaurant, Salt, in Sydney more than 10 years ago.

Branson says he's sold on Mangan, because as well as a great chef, he's also personable and not shy.

"He's an entrepreneur and you have to be more than just a chef to become a successful chef these days, and you have to be media savvy, good on television," Branson says. "A lot of the job is promoting yourself and promoting the business and he does that well.

"But in the end you're only as good as the product, so you can't all be fluff and puff, you've got to have some substance behind you, and he's got substance. He'd be one of the best of his profession, and it's a tough profession," Branson says.

It wasn't by choice that Mangan didn't conquer his own backyard first, but rather, a series of unfortunate events.

After working in London under renowned chef Michel Roux at The Waterside Inn, he returned to Melbourne, optimistic about making his mark here. But it wasn't to be, not then anyway. "I sort of fell into about three different jobs, but all of those restaurants went broke within three to six months of me cooking in them," he says.

"I really wasn't that lucky in Melbourne when I got back."

He was then offered a job in Sydney, and the rest is history.

Not long after starting out in Sydney he experienced a life-changing moment.

"On the Friday night, I'll never forget it, this gentleman walked into the restaurant, into the kitchen, and said: 'Who cooked my dinner tonight?'"

"And I thought, 'oh my God ...' He was a really well-dressed man, and I said, 'ah, I did!'"

He told Mangan it was one of the best meals he'd had in Sydney in years. He handed Mangan his card and told him to get in touch if ever he needed a job. The next day when Mangan turned up for work it seemed the curse of Melbourne had followed him.

"The locks had been put on the doors



Full steam ahead (above) After opening a restaurant in Melbourne, Luke Mangan plans to spread his empire to LA and New York.

Powerful allies (left) Mangan is contracted to do the meals on Sir Richard Branson's airline Virgin America.

on that restaurant. It had gone broke." On the verge of throwing his cooking career in, he called the man who had given him his card. He was John Hemmes, who opened Hotel CBD, and now owns the Ivy hotel in Sydney.

"So that was luck. He got me as head chef in that restaurant and we opened to great reviews." He credits much of his success to strokes of luck like this, along with a lot of hard work.

Five years later Mangan opened Salt, which became a firm fixture on the Sydney social scene. Best friend Chris Lynch says he knew Mangan had "made it" when Hollywood A-Listers Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman started frequenting Salt in the late 1990s.

Lynch, a Melbourne plumber, has been with Mangan when movie directors John Polson and Baz Luhrmann have come up to greet him. "I think that's a fair indication that he must be doing something right, those guys don't say hello to everyone," Lynch says.

It hasn't always been that way though, especially not in primary school when the two met. Lynch remembers Mangan as "a little gangly kid with thick glasses."

He got picked on at school, so he had a difficult time, and Lynch believes it was here that Mangan's determination to be the best he can be in his profession was born. "He wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer ... but somewhere along the way he's developed a very sharp business acumen."

Lynch says Mangan is loyal, and he can be charming and charismatic, but he

can also be a little temperamental, tough and stubborn. Mangan admits he didn't have a good schooling, leaving St Leo's College in Box Hill at 15.

"I didn't really want to continue schooling because I hated it. I couldn't sit still for a minute and I would never do homework. I didn't think it was positive for anyone, for me or the school."

His brother was a chef at Hermann Schneider's restaurant Two Faces, and Mangan did work experience there, before spending the next three years washing pots, peeling potatoes and onions as an apprentice chef.

"I didn't really enjoy cooking until I was finished my apprenticeship, which was four years into it, because it was a lot of hard work and long hours."

Only then did he realise it would actually be his career. He doesn't think he could have done much else. "I couldn't sit behind a desk, I couldn't work in a bank or anything like that."

He says he loved the freedom to travel cooking gave him. "Understanding I had freedom and I could go cook in London or France or America, that gave me a great deal of energy to want to succeed."

And succeed, he has. Luke Mangan is a brand. He is building his own global empire. His foray into Japan came after he was approached by head hunters from a Japanese company who dined at Salt.

They asked if he wanted to move into Tokyo, so he sold half of the Salt brand to Port Japan. He closed Salt in Sydney and opened Glass at the Hilton.

He's put his name to a range of products, such as olive oils, spices and vinegars, which are sold at David Jones and will roll out at his restaurants.

"It'll be like walking into Mangansville," he says. "You're going to have a Mangan olive oil poured at the table, you're going to have a Mangan coffee served to you, which I've blended and picked, a Mangan sauvignon blanc, a Mangan chardonnay and a Mangan water."

After Melbourne he hopes to open restaurants in Los Angeles, New York and possibly expand through Asia.

He's also making steady inroads on to kitchen shelves with a new cookbook, *Luke Mangan: At Home and in the Mood*, to add his previous ones.

He admits financially "things are good". When asked how much he's worth, his reply is equivocal: "Who knows what I'm worth? I haven't sat down and added it up ... People see you as successful, but do I see myself as successful? I just do what I love."

He's one of Australia's first celebrity chefs, but he doesn't see himself as one. "I just see myself as someone who started some restaurants and cooking and enjoys what I do. I wake up every morning loving what I do, still."

Mangan grew up in a Catholic family in Forest Hill, the youngest of seven boys. His father was a bank manager. "By the time I remember growing up there were only three or four of us living at home."

When Mangan was 19 his father died

from a rare blood cancer called aplastic anaemia. He had been a big support to Mangan during his apprenticeship, driving him to the train station early in the morning and often picking him up late at night. "He supported what I did and the hours of commitment I put into it."

Mangan stresses how hard he has worked to get where he is, and it hasn't been all up, up, up to glory — there have been plenty of downs along the way.

He says the culture has changed. Young apprentices are no longer prepared to put in long hours. "Now I get parents ringing us up saying, 'my son worked 50 hours this week. What are you doing to him?'" But when Mangan got yelled at, his father, who came from a background where you had to work to get somewhere, would say, "well, that's good, there are going to be things that come better at the end of it all".

Mangan says he's concerned that the industry's going to have kids working 40 hours a week in restaurants because you can't learn to cook in 40 hours.

"But it's the parents who support that, and that's what I can't fathom. So I was lucky to have that supportive, hard-working, 'she'll be right, just get on with it' attitude. If I didn't have that sort of support from my parents I wouldn't be here."

He regrets his father did not live to see him finish his apprenticeship. Freshly qualified, his new-found hunger to succeed prompted him to write a letter looking for work at London's Waterside Inn restaurant, which, with three Michelin Guide stars, is among the best in the world.

He was turned down and told there was a two-year wait list to work there.

"I felt a bit p---ed off about that so I rang them and eventually got through to the owner, Michel Roux, the chef."

Mangan sealed the deal by offering to work for a month without pay, and if he wasn't any good after that they could get rid of him. He worked for Roux for two years before returning to Melbourne.

Mangan no longer judges success on how many accolades he's awarded, but how busy his restaurants are. So on those terms, looking around Glass on this Tuesday night, he should be a happy man: it is packed out. And it's been like that since he opened to the worst review he's ever had, he says. On the night of the bad review he was expecting 10 diners, but to his surprise 260 came through the doors.

"I think a lot of people who read it thought this can't be right ... we've got to go and check it out. It was the opposite effect and it was the best thing that ever happened."

This made him realise he had to focus on the customer, not food reviewers.

Mangan oversees 80 staff, including 25 chefs, at his Sydney restaurant.

"So now my role is more managerial and my temperament needs to be a lot more focused and calm. I need to be able to fix things and I want them (staff) to be able to come to me. That, to me, is really important as a leader."