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FEILDEL SAYING
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CHEF OF THE YEAR
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AT THE MARROW OF COOKING, lies a simple truth. One element yields to another and in so doing creates an entity greater than its constituent elements. Blades cleave flesh for sirloin. Heat vanquishes raw to medium rare. Classic technique dares of-the-moment imagination. This quintessential duality — as different yet inseparable as salt and pepper — simmers in Manu Feidel.

Were you to write a recipe for a celebrity chef, Feidel's biography makes for the perfect ingredient list. There are three generations of professional cooks in his family. There's a glowing résumé with stints at the likes of London's Café Royal and Café des Amis du Vin. There's his poaching by Australia's culinary demigod Tony Bilson to open the eponymous Bilson's restaurant, which subsequently went on to enjoy three-hat success thanks to Feidel's crowd-pleasing take on contemporary French cuisine.

Yet to vault the chasm between foodie favourite and suburban star, it takes more than sublime sauces and pristine plating.

From his initial appearances on *Ready Steady Cook* in 2005 through to *Masterchef* in 2009 and last year's *My Kitchen Rules*, it was clear that Feidel was what television types deem "great talent".

Broad in the shoulder, stubbled on the face and Gallic of accent, Feidel cha-cha-cha'd his way into the hearts — not to mention fantasies — of millions of Australians when he took out the 2011 series of *Dancing With The Stars*. And you don't become talk of the town without a bit of swagger. In fact, his most noticeable traits are the kind of qualities only his native language has the right words for: sangfroid and je ne sais quoi.

Type the 37-year-old's name into Google and it reveals the most searched-for terms in relation to Feidel. They are: 'single', 'wife', 'shirtless' and 'son'. Let's dispense with the *nons* first: he is not married and he is yet to pull a Tom Williams-style disrobing on camera. Now for the *ouis*: he is single, he has a reputation as a *cordon bleu* flirt and is the father of an impish seven-year-old named Jonti.

Aside from his swivel-hipped talents, part of what Australian viewers found so endearing about Feidel was his willingness to lampoon himself and his roots. Asked by *GQ* how he rates Les Bleus' chance in the World Cup rugby tournament (being played shortly after our interview), he is

MANU FEIDEL HAS WON OVER HIS ADOPTED HOMELAND WITH GALLIC CHARM, SELF-DEPRECATING WIT AND HIS HAVE-A-GO APPROACH TO LIFE.

suffused with the ennui only a son of France can muster before sighing, "Oh the French... they think they're the best at everything."

But cross the line into that which he holds sacrosanct and he will defend it like a man protecting his religion. As a teen, Feidel briefly considered abandoning the family tradition of a life at the stove for one in the circus. Specifically as a clown. Questioned about whether fine food can function as an expression of one's sense of humour, Feidel instantly dismisses the notion as if it were a collapsed soufflé. "Food is a serious business and you have to respect its traditions and your ingredients," he says. "Only once this is in place can you approach it with a sense of lightness."

What about gourmet trends, then? Are there any over-hyped, over-priced, "2012's sun-dried tomato" ingredients that he's happy to see the back of? Pork belly, perhaps?

"You can't criticise pork belly. Pork belly is beautiful," he counters in a tone usually reserved for men defending the aesthetics of an inadvertently insulted sister.

He also rejects the model of kitchen tyranny modelled by the likes of Gordon Ramsay. With his unfailingly measured and even tone, one gets the impression his behaviour would be just as considered. Few "*merdes*" and even fewer unsatisfactory plates would fly around Feidel's kitchen. "During my apprenticeship, I worked for a head chef who would drink a lot and yell at people," he says, "I learnt early on that when you give respect, you gain respect."

Feidel grew up in a home where haute cuisine was "second nature" and his Sydney eatery *L'Etoile* blurs the boundaries between home cooking and restaurant fare. A foam-free zone with no liquid nitrogen in sight, it offers deceptively uncomplicated pearl barley risotto with parmesan and wild mushrooms; chicken two ways with honey-spiced baby carrots and leeks; and pommes frites. There are six mains, six entrées, two salads and five desserts on a menu, which suggests that the simpler the dining, the finer it can be.

"In the 10 years I've been living here," he says, "Australia has gone from being perhaps not as open to good food as the rest of the world to now being ahead of most nations in our appreciation."

Nonetheless, Feidel isn't interested in being the darling of food snobs, and remains conscious of the perils of success. "On the one hand being awarded a hat [the Australian equivalent of a Michelin star] is a great recognition of your hard work," says Feidel. "But as time goes by, it becomes all about retaining a certain standard, so you become less willing to take risks. It's easy to become a slave to your rating."

With a new hosting gig on Channel 7's *Dinner Date* and an interest in Kings Cross restaurant *Aperitif* — with *Boys Weekend* co-star Miguel Maestre at the helm — the chef admits to burning the candle at both ends. "I've always had a philosophy of 'just go for it' when presented with new opportunities because you never know if they will come along again."

It's a philosophy that's paying dividends and is likely to keep *GQ*'s Chef Of The Year *à la mode* for some time yet. ☞

CHEF OF THE YEAR

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
QUINTESENTIALLY

words DAVID SMIEDT photography PIERRE TOUSSAINT styling WAYNE GROSS