

[Transcript] Conversations / The chef who changed the world

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Josh Nyland is here today.

Josh is a chef, originally from the Hunter Region in New South Wales.

He spent much of his childhood living through a protracted, life-threatening illness.

And as soon as he could, he trained as a chef.

And now Josh is known all over the world.

And that's partly because Josh can convince you

that everything you thought you knew about the presentation, the cooking, and the eating of fish is wrong.

Josh's philosophy is, use the whole fish from head to tail, just like we do with other animals.

He says that fish can be aged to delicious effect.

And he says, don't forget the awful.

Because up to 55% of a fish can be awful.

And he turns the eyeballs of Dory into chips.

He turns fish fat into a kind of caramel and tuna loin into pepperoni.

And he makes banh mi with kingfish liver pate

and a mortadella out of kingfish milk, which is fish sperm.

Josh Nyland has set up several hatted restaurants in Australia.

And he's now about to open another one in Singapore.

And in 2020, Josh won the James Beard Award,

which is like the Oscars of food writing for his book,

The Whole Fish Cookbook.

Hi, Josh, welcome.

G'day, what a start.

There you are.

That's you, isn't it?

Were you thinking, was that me?

I was just thinking to myself, this is going to need some padding.

It's going to need some context.

Did you go fishing a lot when you were a kid?

Well, I think mum specifically used it as a tool to get us out of the house.

And we started to run up the walls and get a bit restless.

She'd take us down to the Hunter River in Maitland and we'd go fishing.

And I suppose the interesting thing was looking at the way mum would make the bait.

You know, she would take flour, vegemite and some water and push it into this damper.

And we'd go down to the Hunter River with a bucket and a hand line.

And she teaches how to bait the hook with this sticky dough and then do a bit of a lasso technique.

And you'd have to avoid getting the line caught in the tree that hung over the river.

And if you got the line in the water, then you'd be targeting whiting and flathead but often catch turtles and eels and some boots.

I have to ask, damper with vegemite in it works as fish bait?

Surprisingly, we caught a few flathead with it.

But yeah, I think the eels enjoyed eating that a bit more.
So once you'd caught the flathead, how would she cook it?
Well, the practice was, and I suppose fascinating and also slightly scary
at a young age to watch mum catch this fish.
You know, you'd come up, she'd give it a good whack over the head with a song
or something that was close by, pop it in a bucket and take it home.
And the idea was that you'd get the best knife out of the drawer,
you'd go out to the garden tap, you'd give it a good scale, let it all go outside
and then start the tap running.
And you'd strip the organs out under the running water
and she'd push it into the garden and tell us it was good fertilizer.
And then go ahead, dust it in way too much flour
and then pop it in a fry pan and make it brown.
And that was, I suppose, the fresh fish experience of Maitland
and what it felt like to eat something that was incredibly fresh.
Yes, it was overcooked, but you can remember how sweet it was
and just genuinely, it was a nice experience.
Even if you did have to pull the bones out of your teeth
and watch your sister choke on a fish bone from time to time.
But yeah, it was nice.
But besides that, it was tin tuna, tin salmon and the occasional white anchovy.
That was fish to me.
I think most people today, unlike our grandparents,
are quite squeamish about food and where it comes from.
Do you think that inoculated you,
if that's the word against being squeamishness,
watching your mum gut a fish probably?
Yeah, I think, well, it was nice to be exposed to it, absolutely,
from seeing something in a live state through to cooked on a plate.
There was a certain reverence and an idea that it starts somewhere
rather than just being pulled out of a packet.
And to grow up with grandparents that formerly have a dairy farm
and knowing that, you know, cream goes to butter and those sorts of things.
Like, we're never exposed to hunting or anything like that.
But there was an understanding that there was a pumpkin cart in Maitland
where you'd go get your pumpkins because they'd just been pulled out.
And there was corn fields and things like that.
So we weren't detached and removed from where fresh food was from.
Yeah, and you pull fresh vegetables and fruit out of the ground
that's given nutrients by the putrefaction of fish guts.
Yeah, correct.
Yeah, no, it was enjoyable.
But I mean, we were very much a meat and three veg family.
And I mean, the fancy restaurant experience might have extended to

Mr Seafoods on a Friday night in East Maitland
and then the Endeavour Chinese restaurant on the Pacific Highway
just near our house.

So, yeah, like, there wasn't too much high-end dining.

What was your family life like if he was a kid in Brand Maitland?

Well, Dad was a tax agent and secretary...

Well, a tax agent and bookkeeper.

And Mum did secretarial and bookkeeping work for him.

And it was wonderful to have parents that were always at home.

So there was never a...

I wonder who'll pick me up from school today.

I wonder if Dad will be home yet.

They were always around and they were always there.

And Dad was the coach of my cricket team.

And Mum would always, you know, do the rounds on a weekend
and make sure the sister got netball, I got soccer
and all the boxes were ticked.

So, yeah, it was a really beautiful place to grow up.

And the kids that went to the preschool,
went to the primary school,
that then went to the same high school.

And, yeah, we were able to ride the bike to school
and, you know, come off and graze your knees a few times,
going down a hill too big.

And, yeah, it was beautiful.

I really enjoyed growing up there.

And it was half an hour from a beach,
so we weren't surfy Newcastle kids.

We were, you know, rough and ready, graze knees,
lots of sport, that kind of kid.

What led you to write to Don Bradman as a kid?

Yeah, well, I was fascinated
that when asking my grandma and grandpa, you know,
well, I think it stemmed from a love of cricket, firstly,
and having an uncle who played, you know, represented,
well, Colt Cricket for New South Wales.

And, you know, my dad was, I think his nickname was
Iron Gloves and Island, because he was a wicker keeper.

Look out, here comes Iron Gloves and Island.

Yeah, that's right.

And, you know, all of those wonderful stories,
like, I mean, there's so many good crickets.

Dougie Walters, the dasher from Dungog, you know,
a lot of my mom's side grew up in Dungog.

And, you know, Don Bradman was one of those figures that I read everything that I could possibly read about him, because I was hell-bent on being a cricketer. That was something that I really wanted to do. And I found out that we were loosely related to him in some way along the line, and I thought, well, I'm going to send him a good old-fashioned letter. And did you get a good reply? It wasn't one of those kind of dear-applicant sort of replies, was it? No, it wasn't from his EA. It was a genuine, you know, beautifully, you know, written letter that came back to me. So I was very spoiled to interact with him, and not so much on Instagram, but in a very gentlemanly way. So cricket was an important part of growing up, and, you know, I progressed into a lot of different grades, and I got a century. Dad's best score in cricket was 101, not out. And Mum called him when I was on 98 on a 45-degree day in Maitland, and she said, you probably want to get down to the park so that you can see him get his 100. And so Dad comes down, and, you know, I hit the runs to get me to 100, the last ball of the game, and I look over at Dad, and he's shaking his head looking at me, going, don't you go past that 101? I'm Gloves Nylons' record, right? So I pushed it through the covers, and I came back for two. So 102 not out, and, you know, Dad and I had a good laugh about it, but it was very special. Reminds me of the old saying, there's only one way to beat Collingwood, and that's by one point. Yeah, that's it. As I mentioned at the start, when you were eight years old, you started to get quite mysteriously ill. What were you noticing was wrong? Yeah, throughout the year of 1996, there was glandular fever, there was flus and colds and, you know, gastrobugs and just things that hampered a, you know, a normal year. You know, sport was still happening, and school was still happening, but there was, you know, just missed days just for feeling unwell. And it got to the 13th of October, which was my eighth birthday.

And then you did, like every good eight-year-old did,
was have the McDonald's party and get the ice cream cake and...
Fill it with the fish.
...do the Macarena and have a fill it with the fish.
And then the next day, he hit me like a ton of bricks,
and mum put it down to too much sugar and, you know, running around too much.
And so she organised an appointment at the clinic for the next day.
And the morning of the 15th, then, you know, we're downstairs
and she's helping me get my shirt up over my head.
And as I had my arms up, literally a baseball-sized lump
dropped down out of my rib cage on the right-hand side.
What, under your skin?
Where it physically presented itself after raising my arms up above my head.
And this thing literally presented as though it was a half baseball,
just protruding out of the right side of my stomach.
And we both kind of looked at it, bit shocked, but not really knowing what it was.
And this was, you know, 7.30 in the morning.
And so we go across to the medical clinic over in Tanambut
and, you know, met with the local GP who's looked after us since we were kids.
And he just said, we need to, you know, we need to have a good look at this thing.
So from MRI scans to CT scans and blood tests and X-rays and ultrasounds
and, you know, poking and prodding and, you know, all sorts of things
took us through to about 4.30 in the afternoon.
And, you know, having not eaten the whole day was pretty exhausted.
And then, you know, Dr. Everingham walks into the room and says, you know,
your son's got a Stage 2 Wilms tumour on his right kidney
and we need to get him to Sydney as quickly as possible.
What's a Wilms tumour?
Yeah, so a Wilms tumour, well, I suppose I don't know the granular science of it
but it's a tumour that attaches itself to kidneys.
And it said it had a 70% cure rate and was fairly, you know, a malignant tumour.
So a tumour that's not, it's very different, I suppose, to leukaemia.
It's an actual physical tumour that attaches itself onto the kidney.
Is it one that's particularly prevalent in kids?
Yes, yes, yes, which they made us very aware of.
They said this is quite a common tumour, but where it's up to,
it's at a quite an aggressive stage and we need to kind of get onto it.
And yeah, I mean, all of that got unpacked to us and they said we can organise an ambulance this
afternoon
to get him to Sydney tonight or otherwise you can get him down there.
And I straightaway said, yeah, let's go on the ambulance.
That sounds cool.
And that was it.
Like we, Mum and I, you know, took the information we had.

I was surprised that Mum kept it together.
She stayed quite, you know, solid about it.
And then we got in the car and we were driving back home
and we were literally five minutes from home and I shouldn't have, but I did.
I turned to Mum and I said, am I going to die?
And she, yeah, she, I think at that point then she cracked and she,
that was the first time that I'd really physically seen her
emotionally react so, so intensely to it.
And so then the gravitas of that sunk into me.
Could she give you an answer to your question?
No, no.
And, you know, there was padding around it to make sure that, you know,
we're going to do everything we can and all of this, but, you know,
it's new information and she's just trying to be positive.
But when faced with us, when we're being asked that,
now having my own eight year old right now,
and I suppose three other kids to have that presented by my daughter,
who's eight right now, like I would, I'd be a mess.
I don't know how they were able to do what they did.
So we got home and my sister was furious when I walked in because she'd
missed out on swimming lessons.
And she had the goggles on her head and swiveled the solvent ready to go.
And, and dad was Josh who's making it all about himself.
Yeah, that's right.
It's all about me, me, me.
Right.
And dad and my sister walked in the living room.
Mum was in tears.
And then, yeah, then that whole journey started.
And so we went to Newcastle, the John Hunter Hospital that night.
We, we got told to get to Sydney Children's Hospital instead of,
I suppose, what's that?
What was the old hospital?
I can't remember.
But Ramwick Sydney Children's had just been built and literally within a
couple of weeks and it had opened.
And so we went there and that night, Professor Vowles,
we met with Professor Vowles, who was an incredible surgeon.
And he, you know, took the Sharpie and he drew all over my stomach and said,
here's what we're going to do and made it all as creative and fun as he could.
And that night, I was really crook.
I was, you know, throwing up.
I was really unwell and restless and call it nerves or whatever.
But it just, I was just unwell.

And the next morning they said part of the tumours broken off and attached itself to your vena cava, which is, I suppose, the big, big jugular that sits alongside your aorta.

And so they needed to put heart bypass surgery on standby.

And from there, it was going into surgery to face a good solid hours of trying to get this thing out.

And they said to us afterwards that the tumour that was on my kidney was the size of a fully developed baby's head.

And then the one on my vena cava was 30 watt light globe in size.

So they were very solid tumours.

And coming out, then I had to go into intensive care for a number of days where I was completely out of it and felt like I'd been hit by a bus because of the shape of the scar that basically I had.

It was almost like a shark bite.

It starts very low on the bottom left hand side of my stomach, goes right up just below my diaphragm and then down to the bottom right hand side.

So it's a big triangle.

And yeah, everything, everything was pretty tender.

So lying there in intensive care, I'm imagining you're on super powerful painkillers, probably the most powerful they can give a little boy.

What do you remember as that fog of that started to clear and having a sense, and did you have the sense you were going to live after all and having a sense of where you were and what was around you?

Yeah, I can remember looking at mum next to me quite a few times and she was in a very, you know, I wouldn't say comfortable at all.

She was just a chair like next to my bed and she hadn't moved for days.

Like she was there every step of the way.

And I mean, oftentimes we always speak to the idea of mum did this and mum was there and this was mum and, you know, it's all about mum and absolutely it was.

But, you know, my dad at the time was running his own small business in the back of our house trying to maintain a sense of normality for my sister who was older than me, trying to get her to school on time, pack lunches, get organised and do it all without his best friend and partner there to, I suppose, I don't know, be there to bring any kind of comfort.

He's removed from the situation.

So your mum was with you?

My mum was with me the whole time.

And where was she sleeping?

Literally in a chair next to me that reclined slightly and had pillows and blankets and things.

And obviously MacDonald, Ronald MacDonald House was offered to her and beds were offered to her, but she was very much, you know, attached to the hip of my bed, making sure that anything that happened, she was there for.

You wanted to be near the machine that goes ping?

Yeah.

Yeah.

And I haven't talked about this before, but I feel like it's, I don't know, it adds context to the severity of the situation and the emotion of the situation.

Mum told me afterwards, you know, she, she felt as if during the night she was, you know, she had a moment with somebody in the room where she was told that everything's going to be fine. And yeah, like he's going to, he's going to be able to get through it.

And we've got an eye on him and that was it.

Did she take comfort from there?

Yeah.

Huge, hugely.

Did she tell you that at the time?

I think, I think it was a little while after that she told me, but it was, it was a moment that, you know, you could genuinely see a sense of relief.

And, and there was, I suppose, a little bit more of a feeling of we're getting, we're getting out of this and we're punching through it.

And, and yeah.

And so it was, it's always that feeling, I suppose, if you aren't an overly religious person or you don't, you don't carry those beliefs, it is, it is hard to feel connected to that story.

But having grown up and going to go into church every Sunday with mum and dad and doing the choir thing and being a part of that community, you know, I believe every word of what mum said.

And I do feel that it was a moment that did help kick on the recovery period of that difficult time.

In those hospitals, they sometimes bring celebrity visitors through the place who came to your bedside while you were in that dreadful state.

Yeah.

And I've only got photos to look out of myself with about half a dozen tubes coming out of my, my head and, you know, things like that.

But, you know, you've got Savage Garden there, just, you know, popping in with a, with a signed headshot.

That's incredibly sweet.

Did you know who they were at the time?

Yeah.

Chicken Cherry Cola.

Okay.

Classic.

The David Campezi and the Ramwick Rugby Union team came in.

You would have known who those guys were.

Yeah.

And came in with a pair of Dave shorts, which was pretty fun, was still got them all signed.

Yeah.

And the most extraordinary was meeting Priscilla Presley.

She came to your bed?

Yeah.

Well, she came to the hospital and she was releasing a new perfume and she was doing the rounds and seeing, and seeing the kids in hospital.

And, and I was in a state very much of being able to move around, being a little bit more mobile.

And I remember being presented with this teddy bear that had an American flag on the T-shirt and on the back, it had Priscilla Presley and a big, big X on it.

And yeah, I remember feeling pretty cool about meeting Priscilla Presley.

You're in a really strange world here.

Lots of very strange things are happening to it.

Very.

How long were you on chemo for after that?

So chemo was just short of two years.

And that was, yeah, I mean, post, post surgery, it was two weeks of radiotherapy.

And then coming back to the reality of going to and from school, I had two doses of chemo most weeks.

Some weeks were just one.

And there was two different types of chemo.

There was one that was 30 minutes worth that was administered over 30 minutes.

And another that I remember very, very vividly of being wrapped in foil and it was extremely cold because it needed to be kept in the fridge or the freezer.

And I can remember for three hours feeling, you know, like cold liquid was going into you.

And rather than getting the vein found on your arm, I had a portacath in my chest and the portacath attached itself to the tube that went up into your neck.

And then the chemo kind of went through your system more efficiently that way.

They didn't have to find the veins every time.

But unfortunately, during the chemo, I suppose, across those years, during one occasion of getting my chemo, the portacath got inserted and it actually missed the top of the portacath.

And for the best part of an hour and a half, I had a full dose of chemo go into my left arm and it burnt all the tissue in my left armpit.

And it was incredibly painful and I can remember the pain and I can remember being really uncomfortable,

but also the, I suppose, feeling of catastrophizing a situation was made out to feel almost like calm down.

It's just another batch of chemo.

It's all good.

You don't have to be so sad and things like I don't know how to communicate.

There's something wrong.

It's really bad.

And can you please stop?

And it was only then where they did realize it was quite a bad situation that, yeah, they kind of looked at what the damage was and that damage then amounted to not being able to use my left arm for the best part of three months, like at all.

It was very much a limp, limp limb that sat on my hip for quite a while.

Did you get it?

I mean, you're using your arm.

Is it fully recovered?

Yeah.

Like, I mean, if you, if I was to really show you a full extension of raising my hands above my head, my right fingers go higher than my left, but it's very much a minor detail now.

But at the time it was required a whole lot of hydrotherapy and physical therapy as well to get the muscle working again.

And during that time of hydrotherapy, I met a wonderful woman in East Maitland who was that hydrotherapist and she would bake me cakes and, you know, try to make every occasion that I saw a memorable one.

And then one week, and I don't want to make this story sound even more disastrous than it is, but tragically she passed away.

One week she was camping with her family and, you know, rolled out of a tent into the river. And it was incredibly difficult because she made those occasions that were really hard a lot easier.

And to deal with that, then compounding on top of everything else that was going on, ear infections from swimming in the pool and all that sort of stuff and getting your ears flushed out.

And then chemo and then trying to get school back on track and trying to get sport back on track.

And yeah, tricky.

This is like the most, this is like a really, maybe this is a really boring and obvious question.

But is, do you see a connection there between this awful ordeal and you becoming a chef, becoming the kind of chef you are in a very, and I think we have to agree a quite a driven person.

Yeah.

And I do strongly believe that you get a rocket pack on your back when you go through something like that.

And I work off the measure that anything that I want to achieve in life personally and anything that I would like, you know, as a family or anything we want to do, like we will 100% do it.

There is nothing that is going to stop me from, from achieving what I want to do.

That's something that I've carried with me since probably the age of 10 or 11, probably since I finished the last batch of chemo that I had.

I just thought, well, I get to do what I want to do now.

So did you always know you were going to be a chef?

No.

And I think it was born from the idea literally from being driven from school.

Sorry.

Yeah.

Getting picked up by mum at school, driven to the John Hunter hospital, sitting there with me doing my chemo, then driving me home to make me lunch, to then drive me back to school and finish the day off.

And I think, yes, mothers are meant to play the role of making sure kids are well fed and look after them in sickness and everything.

But at the end of the day, there's a woman there who has taken three and a half hours intentional time out of her day to provide, you know, that service of getting me there, but also just to stop for half an hour, cook me a meal, be it a sandwich or a soup or a pie or something like that.

She's cooked something for me and given me, I suppose, comfort in what that meal is. And I think that act of generosity and hospitality and kindness is one of the most significant things you can do for someone else.

And I think that act of hospitality was the catalyst behind why I wanted to be a chef and why I genuinely love to cook for people and why all of our venues will be transparent in the sense that you can see us and we can see you.

People who have lives in service to something or other are the happiest people I've interviewed on this show.

It's always been the case.

That's one of the most clear observations I've had.

Service makes you happy weirdly enough for other people.

Being a chef wasn't born from sitting under a table with grandma making scones or, you know, things like that.

It was just genuinely because I love hospitality.

And so what did you imagine that life was going to be like as a chef back then?

Yeah, well, I said to mum and dad when I was 15, are you happy if I finish at year 10 and get stuck into a full-time apprenticeship?

And, you know, we explored what school-based internships and doing things casually and things would look like.

But I was ready to go the whole hog and so I stepped into an apprenticeship.

Broadcast, this is Conversations with Richard Feidler.

Hear more conversations anytime on the ABC Listen app.

Now, you're a nice mate.

Did you have much experience of fine dining as a kid?

No, not at all.

Like I said, the old Endeavour Chinese restaurant on the Pacific Highway.

It was about as formal as it got.

So how did you know what to look for?

Well, yeah.

I mean, when I really locked into this idea of being a chef, then I did my first school-based workplace program at the Crown Plaza in Newcastle, which was very recently opened venue.

And I got two days whilst I was at school in year 10 to go see what that was like.

And I can remember my feet incredibly painful and my back just incredibly sore.

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And, you know, it was full commercial cookery.

You needed sharp knives and you needed to kind of fall in and do what you were told.

And I just found that exhilarating.

You did what?

Like, as I'm imagining it, mate, this is the cliché that it's a room.

It's very hot.

It's full of people shouting while they're doing painstaking work and to time as well.

Yeah.

You love that?

Yeah, I did.

And I think there wasn't that immediate sense of, you know, do this, do this, do this.

You know, you're a 15-year-old boy in a very professional environment.

And you get told to execute certain tasks, like, you know, peeling a pineapple ready for the breakfast buffet station and taking the tops off the strawberries and silly things like that.

But for the two days that I was there, it really solidified to me that I want to be involved in what this looks like on a full-time basis.

And where did you start once you got your first training position?

Yeah.

So I think anybody that's been to Newcastle knows the Queensborough Brewery, which is the old pub that's got a restaurant there.

And there was two chefs there, Elizabeth Box and Anthony Kosen.

And they wanted to elevate the food offering, so they removed themselves out of that venue.

And they opened a venue called the Brewery Restaurant, which was a far more formal dining room.

And from there, I saw the job ad in the newspaper.

And yeah, I've made a call and we teed up a conversation.

And they were very, very open arms about me joining the team as a first-year apprentice, which I think is quite remarkable for any business.

And how many times did you cut your fingers and burn your fingers?

I'll tell you, the worst cut that I've ever had happened in that first few months where I put my knife into a block of butter that had been sitting on the bench for an hour before doing it.

So the inside was still cold and the outside was just nice and warm.

And I put the knife through and as I pushed down on it, my left hand slid along the length of my knife down to the tip.

And then as I pushed down and in, the knife went through my left, just through the muscle in my left thumb.

Ow!

And foolishly, my chefs come over, ripped the knife out of my hand, said, go sort it out and then come back.

And so went to the clinic, got a few stitches, and then back I was sweeping the floor at the end of the night.

So...

[Transcript] Conversations / The chef who changed the world

Tell me how you got to meet the kind of well-known Sydney chef Peter Doyle this time.
Well, with the connection to having a childhood cancer, I won a scholarship from the Red Kite Foundation, which was formerly known as the Malcolm Sargent Foundation.
And they were hosting an event where a new castle restaurant would collaborate with a Sydney restaurant to raise money for kids with cancer.
And I was receiving that scholarship at the award that would firstly pay for my first set of knives and chef's jacket and all this sort of stuff, so very fitting.
And the restaurant turned out to be Est restaurant with Peter Doyle.
And so we were at Scratchley's doing this event.
And it was quite, you know, amazing that I'm cooking in the same kitchen as Peter Doyle.
And I've literally got a poster of him in my room at home, alongside Shannon Bennett and alongside Warren Turnbull and all these great chefs of that era.
And I held them in that same rock star status, you know what I mean?
So to stand alongside him, I was shocked.
And I went out, told my story on stage, and they had a little video playing in the background.
And I look over at the kitchen and Peter's got tears coming out of his eyes.
And I was like, oh, wow, OK, you know, and I went back into the kitchen and he said, oh, you know, I'd love it if you could come to Est and have a lunch and enjoy yourself and come and see the work we do.
And I said, oh, that sounds amazing. Thank you.
And you took him up on it.
And then I said to my chef that night, I said, chef, can I have the day off tomorrow?
And then he said, yeah, of course.
So I wake up early the next morning, get on the train from Maitland to Sydney.
And when you think Sydney is a boy from Maitland, you think Central.
So you get off at Central and I head to Est.
And meanwhile, I've headed to King Street, Newtown, because I forgot that it was the other way.
So I get to Est at 10 to 12.
I get up through the lift onto level two and I walk out and there's a gentleman there named Ivan.
And he goes, welcome, very professional.
He's looking at a 16-year-old kid that's walked into the restaurant 10 minutes early with no supervising adult with them.
There's a nasty bandage on his finger.
And then he said, welcome.
And I said, oh, thank you.
He goes, do you have a booking?
And I said, well, no.
Peter Doyle told me to come and have lunch.
And he's like, OK, absolutely.
Come on through.
Really, that worked?
Literally.
Wow.
And so having worked at Est in the future, then knowing the seat that I sat on

was the best seat in the house.

You know, from midday till 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I had four hours of some of the most extraordinary, memorable, modern Australian food.

And Peter's repertoire at that time was quite amazing.

So Peter came out at midday and said, what are you doing here?

And I said, well, you told me to come have lunch.

And he goes, yeah, but yesterday.

And so it was quite funny.

And then at the end of that meal, he came out and he said, would you like to work for us?

We'd love to have you.

Have you join us?

And I said yes.

And then I got home and mum and dad said no.

And they explained to me, you need to serve another bit of time with these people that have given you the opportunity in Newcastle.

So that was good advice.

It was?

Really?

Really?

Really?

Yeah, OK.

It wasn't?

No, it was.

But I told my chefs in Newcastle, can you get me ready for going to Sydney?

Can you start planning towards I need to get myself organised to go?

And they did that.

And six months later, I called Peter Doyle and I said, Pete, I'm ready for that job now.

And he said, well, we just won restaurant of the year, chef of the year and three hats and everybody wants to work here.

So bad luck.

And so from that stage then, I'd been eating out in Sydney every most weeks during that year.

And so I was...

What do you mean, like getting on the train again?

Yeah.

Going down to Sydney?

Yeah.

And what do you mean, even 18?

So are you drinking mineral water with all these meals?

Yeah, I'd have the 10 course tasting menu with tap water, thanks.

You're this kid sitting alone in these high end restaurants, eating this glorious food.

Right.

That's fantastic.

And this was how I developed a rapport with people like Matt Moran and Guillaume Brahimi

[Transcript] Conversations / The chef who changed the world

and Warren Turnbull and Colin Fastenich and all these great chefs of that era.
I was watching them in their prime and they were probably watching me thinking, what's this kid doing here?
And one of those meals was a glass brazerie.
And I sat there for the duration of lunch.
Luke came out and sat at my table and said...
Luke Mangan, yeah, right.
And he said to me, are you a chef?
And I said, well, yeah.
And then he said, what are you doing?
Like, how's lunch?
Are you enjoying everything?
And I said, yeah, I'd love to work here, you know.
And he gave me a trial and from there I ended up working at glass brazerie and had a great time there.
And what does that involve working behind in the scenes in a restaurant like that?
I mean, you know, a lot of people like me have seen that series, The Bear.
Yeah.
Have some ideas of what a kitchen might or might not be.
Yeah.
You know, a lot of that frenetic shouting, a lot of palaver carrying on, all that kind of awful gut freezing tension and silence.
Yeah.
What's the truth of it?
Well, yeah, the truth of glass was very much, this was my birth into fire very much.
I was leaving Sydney as a solo person, no one else, living by myself and age 17 walking into a kitchen that was 350-seat dining room or 300-seat dining room.
You know, most lunches we'd do about 320 people and then dinner we'd turn it on for probably 400.
And I was one of probably 24 chefs that worked on a larder section, a pastry section, fish and meat and, you know, everybody had their roles.
And, you know, it was incredibly physical, you know, from, yes, the shouting and the yelling to communicate in a kitchen that was enormous to forgetting to get your pots and pans from downstairs and needing to run down there quickly and then bring it back up, making 100 kilos of mashed potato in the morning and then needing another 50 kilos in the afternoon and, you know, to even people playing silly, well, doing silly things like getting rid of all of your prep in the cool room so that you have nothing for the next day and then walking into an empty cool room and needing to start again.
There was all those things that happened and, you know, yeah, you'd cop an earful most days and it was, there is the strike rate of chefs that kind of came in and out was, you know, you'd see some people that came in that just didn't cut the mustard.
Well, just to fast forward a bit.
You started working, you were hired to work at a top tier fish restaurant called Fishface and you started working there.

[Transcript] Conversations / The chef who changed the world

How about, how did that go for you?

Yeah.

Your first shift at that restaurant?

Well, the best, yeah, the best way to sum up my time at Fishface was really in the trial, which was, I was told to stand behind Stephen in the kitchen and Stephen Hodges was opening oysters and putting in dockets on the till.

And then we had a sushi chef next to us on our right and he responsible sushi sashimi and most of the very traditional Japanese dishes.

And then a head chef cooking and plating the main courses and hot entrees and then a girl in the corner on the deep fryer and doing pastry and lada.

So it was a very organized kitchen.

There was nowhere else to go.

Your arms had to make movements like an octopus, like up, down, side to side.

And nobody had to take a step one way to the other.

It was perfectly set up to do what they do.

And Fishface at Darlington was an incredibly popular restaurant.

It was a Sunday night.

There was a line out the door, 5.30 the gates opened.

Everybody got their seat and literally within 10 minutes, all of the dockets were in.

And there was two dockets in that I noticed, you know, the manager pick up a plate of food off a gentleman that then brought it back to the kitchen.

And the manager said to the chef, you know, the fish is raw, like need to go again.

And this would be fine if it was just the one docket that he was doing, but obviously he's doing 15 other dockets.

And that was met with some hostility in the form of picking the plate up and throwing it against the wall

to the left, which is then the girl on the left has ducked to avoid getting a mouthful of fish.

And the plates then turned into powder and the fish has kind of exploded across, you know, the bench and all of that.

The, you know, Steve's probably had a chuckle thinking, oh, well, get on with it.

Like, let's keep going.

And then the chef's kind of given the manager a mouthful.

And then it's turned out that the manager is actually the partner of Stephen.

And then Stephen gives the chef a mouthful.

And so everybody's at each other.

And I'm watching all of this unfurl.

This isn't your first hour of this brand new job.

Yeah, this is a trial.

Right.

And then the chef throws his tongs and he's apron down on the bench, tells people where to go, grabs things and leaves.

And then Stephen leaves behind him.

The manager leaves behind him.

And then the three of them now outside.

[Transcript] Conversations / The chef who changed the world

And I'm staring down the barrel of all of these dockets in, you know, one had a beautiful restaurant that I admire so much.
And it's been a desire to want to work there and be around Stephen because of his incredibly, you know, highly skilled technical approach to fish.
And I'm watching this thing come apart.
The girl who's in the corner is now hugging her bin and in tears because she's just avoided, you know, disaster.
The guy on the sushi chef, the sushi chef in the corner hasn't moved. He's still just slicing his fish carrying on as though nothing's happened. He's seen it before.
He's just like, yeah, whatever.
And so I'm looking at these set of tongs and a tea towel on the bench. I'm like, right, I know how to do this.
And so having had a couple of meals at Fishface leading up, I had an understanding of what was expected, what the standard was. And I put it together the best I could.
So I cooked for the next hour and a bit.
And it was probably the most exhilarating addictive service that I've ever cooked because the tangible outcome of putting a raw product into a fry pan and then plating it up and then giving it to a guest, the guest looking at it going, wow, this is delicious.
And then physical reaction to walk over and go, thank you so much. That was delicious.
So we had a great night and then they leave.
And I'm like, wow, this is amazing.
And you have no idea what's just happened.
But they love the theater, right?
Everybody knew going to Fishface, they'd be a bit of theater. They'd be a bit of action, you know what I mean?
And so that was the action that night.
And I basically, you know, everybody came back in.
Steve, manager, the chef came back in arm and arm, best mates came over to me and said, how'd you go?
And I said, oh, you know, I think I did a good job.
I hope everything was all right.
And then Steve said, do you want the job?
And I said, well, yeah, yeah, I do.
And so I took the job.
A couple of days later, the chef ended up leaving.
And by default, then I was responsible for the food that was leaving the kitchen.
Well, it's taken me a while to get here.
But tell me how a couple of experiences in this job upended all your ideas about what fish was, how it should be kept presented and served and cooked and eat.
Yeah, so one night during the clean down at Fishface,

which would extend itself into the early hours of the morning,
Steven was making his brulees that he became very famous for making.
And this was at one in the morning.
And in a fairly lucid state that he doesn't remember really talking to me much
about it at the time.
I was expressing to Steve my difficulties toward selecting garnishes
that were coherent with the fish species that was in front of me.
And I said, how do you pair up things properly so that you do justice to how good these fish are?
And he goes, well, why don't you think of fish more as meat?
And I'm like, what do you mean?
And he goes, well, tuna kind of looks like a cow, right?
You could cook it like beef.
You know how to cook beef, don't you?
And then from there, he rattled off swordfish as a pig.
He rattled off mahi mahi like, you know, a roast piece of lamb.
He said, you know, pigeon was almost like a mackerel or a bonito.
And so, you know, there's no cognitive ability at that age or time
where you can just piece all that together into this magical, you know, plan.
But it was an eye-opening thing that he said.
And I wrote it all down in my book.
And then the second occasion was the same kind of thing.
I was cleaning down at the end of the night.
I foolishly made the mistake of not packing my fish away.
And so there was a fish, there was 15 portions of fish on a tray
that were left exposed to the fan in the fridge.
And I got a mouthful the next morning saying, why didn't you pack it away?
And I said, I missed it.
I'm sorry.
And so then the decision was, well, do we keep it?
Or do we, you know, do we throw it out?
Like, what's the thought?
So I made the decision.
Let's keep it because there's nothing wrong with it.
It's just aesthetically not as moist as what we would usually work with.
So I'm working with this fish that's dry skinned
and feels far more fatty and rich than what it would usually be.
And so I put it into the fry pan and the skin puffs off the fish.
Like pork crackling.
A big bubble pops up and I'm looking at this thing like this is unbelievable.
And this is the crunchiest skin I've ever cooked.
The people eating it are like, wow, this is amazing.
But I never told Steven like that, you know, like I never said,
let's dry the fish skin now.
Like let's just do it like that.

Again, I just wrote it in my book and moved on.
And I just thought, well, it's almost like cheating.
If you're starting with skin that's a little bit more dry,
then you're putting it into a hot fry pan full of hot fat.
Then you're going to get a better outcome.
You put a wet fish in a hot fry pan full of fat.
It's likely going to stick.
You know, it's just, it makes more logical sense.
Like beef.
Like beef would if you did that with beef, right?
Think about peaking duck.
Like there's all this conditioning and planning
and processing with regards to getting the skin dry
so that when you put it in an oven, it goes crispy.
And so if you were to give that duck a quick spritz with water
just before it went into the oven, it wouldn't be as crisp.
And so again, that was, you know,
another thing that I wrote down and then come 2016
when Julie, my wife and I opened St. Peter,
there was very much this awareness, this frontline awareness
that we're working with a highly fragile,
highly laborious, expensive protein that is fish.
And if I'm going to get my first invoice back from fish
that says that I've just spent \$5,000 to turn this restaurant
on just with fish alone, it makes absolutely no sense
to put \$2,500 of this bill in the bin.
And that's what we do on a daily basis in a Western kitchen.
There's very little reverence towards,
let's use the stomach, let's use the heart or the liver.
So we go to all the trouble of cutting out the fillet.
That's right.
We take the rest of the fish away.
That's right.
We take our 15 by six centimeter rectangle out of the middle
and then we move on.
And yeah, sure, you can make some fish stock
and you can do bits and pieces with the collars and things.
But where's the luxury and where's the reverence
within those parts that encourages the consumer
to want to purchase it and see it as being as valuable
as the fillet?
Because inevitably the bone, the organs
and all the bits and pieces, they're not cheaper
than the rest of the fish.

They carry the exact same monetary value.
And so this is where it all started.
The costs associated with the work we were doing
didn't make sense until we started using more of the fish.
So when you say using more of the fish,
you're talking a lot of the time about awful, fish awful.
What kind of things have you found you can do with fish awful?
Or is this something you've discovered
or it's been done in cooking traditions from elsewhere?
Because my wife's Singaporean and she totally
is into cooking the whole fish and thinks this whole thing
of taking fillets out is mad as well.
So what have you been able to do with that fish awful
and the other parts of the fish?
I think firstly it is poignant to say that, you know,
culturally this has been done all over the world.
And for reasons born shealy out of necessity,
first and foremost, but then...
All the best food comes from start from famine.
That's right.
Starvation.
Well, let's try this then, you know,
since we're all starving to death.
Even if you think about, you know, caviar,
it's born from fish awful, the eggs of a fish, basically,
getting produced into something that's highly luxurious
and beautiful.
And oysters aren't pretty.
No.
The first person, as it's said, who ate the first oyster
was a brave person.
Absolutely.
But then found it was pretty tasty after all.
So for us, you know, there was information at hand
with regards to, yes, you know, there's parts of Japan
that celebrate, you know, texturally, I suppose,
from a Western approach, from a boy from Maitland,
I would never settle up and celebrate the texture of eyes,
or I would never settle up to the fish sperm
or shirako in Japan.
Like those things carry such fishy connotations
and softness and creaminess and all those things.
So how is it that we can transform and modify these awful
of a fish into something that we can feel

nostalgically close to?

Which is then why we have interpreted many different parts of the fish in different ways.

One of them being we make ice cream out of the vitreous humour from a fish eye, which is to basically replace the yolks taken from an egg from a chicken.

And, you know, we've made foie gras using the liver of John Dory.

We've gone and made patties, terrenes, sausages.

So when you put these fish guts in the sausage, that's a form most of us are familiar with and are pretty happy with.

Absolutely.

I mean, when people go up to fish poultry in Paddington or out at Waterloo and pick up their couple of fish sausages, it's far more aesthetically pleasing to interpret what that is as opposed to then what those products would be if they were sitting on a plate.

You mentioned the whole idea about keeping this need to keep fish moist.

Yes.

When we go to fish markets, we see fish lying on ice that often glistens with moisture.

What's the mistake that's going on there?

Well, I mean, if we think about it from a scientific point of view, all fish have an organic compound in them called trimethylamine.

And when a fish dies, it converts into trimethylamine oxide.

And then upon poor management of that trimethylamine oxide and the conversion starting to happen where it starts to convert into ammonia, then that's what we refer to when we're talking about fishy fish.

So when people come in and say, what's your least fishy fish?

They're not referring necessarily to mackerel or bonito or things that have stereotypically been fishy.

What they're talking about is what's the one with the least amount of ammonia onset on it?

Hannah, you're saying to me that that watery spray that's being sprayed, is that causing the fishy fish?

Well, if we think about it from this way, with osmosis, if you're putting freshwater onto a saltwater product, as the freshwater moved through the membrane of the saltwater product, it's trying to find an equilibrium, which is then basically making the salt product less salty.

The cells are starting to fill with freshwater.
And as they fill with freshwater, they get to a breaking point where they actually rupture.
And then the freshwater then basically collapses the structure of the flesh of the fish.
And then that residual moisture that's left within the fillet is then where bacteria's carbon begins to grow.
Because if we think about it this way, if you go into a butchery and you look at the strip loin of a piece of beef, strip loin on the bench with bone in, and then we want a couple of sirloin steaks.
We take the knife, we draw it along, we take the sirloin off, we dip it into a pool of water, we bring it onto the cutting board, we take a slice of sirloin, we dip it in water again, and then we go and we put it on ice.
How long is it, do you think, until that meat goes rancid or slimy or sticky or begins to even have an odor?
And then also, how is it then that you'll be able to take that wet piece of beef and put it onto a barbecue and achieve beautiful caramelization and browning and all this sort of thing?
When really, when you think about it, it's probably going to stick and you're going to need a good shovel to dig it up off the grill bars.
And it's the same with fish?
This is what we have with fish basically.
And to my point around ammonia, the only way you mitigate ammonia is through the use of acidity, which is why we've got centuries of knowledge, especially from the French repertoire that suggests that we put a half a lemon with our fish and why we have Hollandaise sauce with our smoked salmon and why we have tartare sauce with our fish and chips.
They're all acidic garnishes getting ready for the imminence of odours.
That have been caused, to some degree, by spraying water on them in the shop?
Correct. And to me, it's just foolish.
It's dumb logic, basically, to suspend a fish in a state of mediocrity on ice and then every 20 minutes walk along and give it a quick spray so it all magically looks as if it's just come out of the water again.
Because when you get home and you unwrap your plastic and your paper and you smell that fish, it is going to smell like fish.
Sorry, just the whole idea that anxiety about that fishy smell is the very thing that's leading to practices that create that fishy smell.
Correct. So, like I said, it's almost like if our car's dirty, we wash it.
So, if a fish has scales on it, like think about the practice.
We scale a fish, we wash it, we gut a fish, we wash it, we fill it a fish, we wash it

and then it goes on ice and you take it home and expect to have some kind of amazing romantic time with this fish and have a good outcome.

It's never going to be the case.

And the best experiences we've ever had with fish usually happen on the back of the boat.

When we first caught the fish, we take a slice of it, we eat some sashimi

or we grill it on the boat or do whatever we need to do

and it'll be removed of that fishy odor because nobody's had their hands on it.

Nobody's ruined the beautiful state that it could have been in.

See, I'm only just now, just now, beginning to grasp the perversity

with which we treat fish and cook fish in this country and elsewhere.

This is global.

Like there is no fish market in the world that practices any kind of dry handling.

Everything is done under running water.

How receptive is the rest of the world to hearing what you have to say, George?

Yeah, I feel very fortunate there's a captive audience within, I suppose,

the community of chefs around the world that were very attracted to the words

written in the whole fish cookbook and were, I suppose, from a creative

and innovative point of view.

They were celebratory to the idea of dry aging and through utilizing the whole fish.

But at times, obviously, it's met with hesitation across the, I suppose,

broader industry space because what I'm suggesting is, you know,

we should be able to achieve the outcome of two fish from one fish

and we should be able to have a longer shelf life with a fish

that extends past day three and four.

But this basically complicates the profitability and margin that lies within fish.

Josh, this has been completely fascinating.

We've squished so much into an hour.

It's been such a pleasure.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

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