

Reaching new heights

As the landmark Summit restaurant turns 40, its chef and owner takes us for a turn. By Josie Gagliano.

photo: phil rogers

If you're of a certain age, you may remember television advertisements from a few decades back with the catchy jingle and slogan, "See you at the Summit." If you recall that ad, it will come as no surprise to you that the landmark Sydney revolving restaurant is turning 40 this week.

Officially opened on February 29, 1968, when the first conqueror of Mount Everest, the late Sir Edmund Hillary, climbed its 165-metre exterior, the restaurant has since served more than 3.5 million customers and has travelled on its axis the equivalent of two times the earth's circumference. Perched atop Level 47 of the Harry Seidler-designed Australia Square skyscraper, the venue has seen four decades of change in the midst of a fickle Sydney restaurant scene, though surprisingly, it has had only three owners. The current proprietor is Michael Moore, who despite his media profile (he's on Nine's *Fresh* and *Mornings with Kerri-Anne*) is the most "un-celebrity" of chefs by mere virtue of his friendly manner and accessibility. The man embodies passion for food and his energy seems relentless. Merely one hour before our conversation he is live on TV on Kennerley's show and, once he is done, makes the dash to his restaurant in the CBD. Moore concedes it's just a typical day for him but he is far from fatigued.

"Look, you know, I'm lucky. I don't think I've ever worked a day in my life. I just get up and live. It's like, 'what's on the agenda today?' I may have this party for lunch or dinner, then filming, then an interview. I think it's just the life of a modern chef, and it's really exciting.

"People look at me sometimes and say, you've been on the go for 16 hours today and I say, oh really, was I? But in the middle of that I may have ducked off to the gym or met someone for a coffee. I think most of the chefs in town that have a profile, their lives would be very similar. It's just whatever is happening today, you take on. It's all good."

Right now, the Summit is beyond good – it's white hot. The restaurant, which takes 105 minutes to complete a full turn and is the largest revolving restaurant in the world, with panoramic views, has also seen its profile do a complete 360. That's largely thanks to Moore's management. He was general manager and chef at the venue for two and a half years before buying it, with partners, in July 2007.

"I was running it for a big company, and they gave me a pretty free hand, but nonetheless you're still operating it under their systems and controls. We built the business up and it was on the rise and then the opportunity to buy it came up and I just decided, let's take the plunge. I know this business and I can see the potential. And the Summit had well and truly turned a corner as far as its market position [goes]. So, on that basis I decided, well, what a time to do it. It's a big deal but this restaurant will definitely benefit from private ownership again. I'm only the third owner in 40 years and that's rare in this business."

Moore's pedigree is impressive, having spent his career alternating between Sydney

and London. Born in the UK, he graduated with a distinction in Professional Cookery from the Highbury College of Technology and, following a stint at Cafe Royal in London's West End, arrived in Sydney in 1985. He was appointed chef saucier at the Regent Hotel's famed restaurant Kables, but returned to London and became senior chef de partie poissonier (fish chef) at The Ritz.

Returning to Sydney, he took on the position of chef de cuisine at the two-hatted restaurant Craighend in Kings Cross. Then, at 26, Moore became executive chef at Darling Harbour's five-star establishment Hotel Nikko. This was followed by a turn as executive chef at Bluebird, Sir Terence Conran's acclaimed London food market, cafe and restaurant.

In 1998 Moore again returned to Australian shores. Appointed consulting director of food at Bennelong Restaurant at the Sydney Opera House, he was tasked with changing the food culture at the venue, an irresistible challenge for Moore.

"I think it comes down to your personality type and apart from all my experience in cooking, my greatest natural attribute is that I motivate people. I can get a group of people together and get them focused on achieving a target. I'm a high-energy, highly focused person. I never look at the size of the project; I just get on with it. I have this thing called my 'top 10' and that's the 10 most important things I have

to do today. So, even if a thousand jobs need to be done, I don't worry about the other 990, I just focus on my top 10, and every couple of days I update my top 10, and keep cracking on. In my life I've followed that philosophy, too."

The owner of restaurants Pruniers, Bouillon and Bluefin, and a consultant to Wildfire at Circular Quay and Accor's Sofitel Hotels and Resorts nationally, Moore knows a thing or two about the Sydney culinary scene, and has brought his smarts to the Summit.

"When I first started, I looked at it and thought, 'it's very touristy, what can I do with this restaurant?' I realised the average customer at the Summit is a local person, showing Sydney to their interstate or international friends, and that's a big part of our business. So I turned it into a Sydney-focused restaurant and wanted to make Sydney people proud of the food, proud of the restaurant, and proud of Sydney."

"That was the big turning point for the Summit. We work in a Sydney market, we sell ourselves in a Sydney market, we're part of the Sydney food scene, and we buy and handle the right food. Although it's an international restaurant and one any city would be proud to have, we are totally focused on current food, products, trends and what is going on in the Sydney market. That's the driver, and that's what's given us the success we're enjoying now."

With a new menu introduced just last week, and "a lot of plans" for this year and the next for the restaurant, which also houses the popular Orbit Bar, Moore says he wants to keep having fun and cooking good food – a philosophy he applies to the operation of a 40-year-old dame who is looking fresher than ever.

"I wanted to make people proud of the restaurant, and Sydney."