

# the (sydney) magazine



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busy world of a celebrity chef

**Matt  
Moran**

## Fuelling Matt

### Morning coffee

"Flat white, no sugar, from Three Blue Ducks cafe in Bronte. It's just a couple of young guys having a go, and they're good cooks. If I'm hungry I get the Blicher muesli."

### Beans for home

"I get the same beans we use at Aria! Single Origin Roasters."

### Sunday lunch with the family

"I like North Bondi Italian Food. The menu changes all the time, so we normally just get a heap of stuff and share it. I love the casual atmosphere. We go for yum cha at the Golden Unicorn Chinese Restaurant in Maroubra; we call it 'bra cha'."

### Post-workout protein

"I never eat before I go to the gym in the morning, and afterwards, it always changes. But I eat a lot of eggs and I'll often scramble them. Don't use milk in your scrambled eggs; put in a little bit of water with just butter. The water makes it nice and soft."

### Don't tell the trainer...

"I like a good old Magnum Almond Ice-cream."

### Hates

Raw capsicum.

### Loves

Sea urchin.

### At the cinema lolly bar

"I don't normally eat a lot of lolly shit, but I love choc-tops; it's got to be vanilla."

### Footy food

"My boy's a mad Sydney Roosters supporter and I'm a mad St George-illawarra Dragons supporter, so we always go to the traditional Anzac Day match. One of us is not happy, and that's generally Harry. We don't eat there. Occasionally I go down to the Clovelly Hotel to watch a game. The meat's good there. As a local it's fantastic and the people are great."

### Local Chinese

"Chairman Mao in Kensington. Order anything hot. You'll find that if you ask people like Tetsuya and Neil Perry, they'll say that's their favourite Chinese, too."

### At the Easter Show

"I haven't been to the Easter Show for years. But it's like going to Disneyland; you eat before you go."

duck livers with yam purée and fried prosciutto, described the young chef's food as eclectic. "Sydney's answer to Cal-Ital – we call it Mod-Med". When Moran's at Potts Point opened five years later, the 1996 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* named it the year's best new restaurant.

Industry heavyweights took to him. Neil Perry spotted his star early, despite a "poor excuse for a scraggly ponytail". And Joan Campbell, the late grande dame of food publishing, loved him. "When my phone rang on a Sunday morning, I would always say, 'It's either my mother or Joan Campbell,'" remembers Moran. (Presumably, Murr never sent a John Dory dish back with a message that "it was f...ing shit", as Campbell once did.)

Moran has collected an eclectic bunch of close friends along the way, restaurant folk such as Michael Moore and Gordon Ramsay, whom he met at Moore's buck's night in England, but also Silverchair's Daniel Johns and artist Fantauzzo. If there is a common thread with his friendships, it's talent, hard work and, more often than not, an appreciation for speed (Moran's garage is stacked with Ducatis). Friend James Valentine, the writer, broadcaster and musician, describes Moran, an avid supporter of the St George-illawarra Dragons rugby league team, as "blokey – he's got a blokey motorbike, he does blokey workouts". Another mate, INXS's Kirk Pengilly, says simply, "He's a country boy at heart."

"One thing about Matt is that he is a people person," says wife Sarah Hopkins. "That is a big part of why he enjoys doing the television stuff. We'll sit over dinner with him telling me what a great guy the soundie is."

Two words dominate any chat about Moran: "generosity" and "loyalty". Family comes first – mum Carolyn, a beautician and hairdresser (she and Jim split more than a decade ago), has a special window table at Aria – but friends, too, are vitally important. Mary have a story to tell about how Moran has come to their rescue. Chef Simon Sandall recalls the time Moran helped him buy his first home: "I walked into work one day and he turned around and said, 'Mate, go and pick up your

keys." Moore remembers how, when he was holed up in Royal North Shore Hospital after his stroke, Moran would personally deliver him snapper from the Aria kitchen. But Moran's loyalty runs both ways. "As long as you're loyal, you're in," says Moore. "As soon as you step outside that circle, you're gone." Another friend puts it like this: "If you cross him, he'll cut you."

**M**oran's charm and a mercurial ability to switch to the sterner role of critic have ensured his success in TV's cooking-competition genre. After breaking through in *Heat in the Kitchen*, he proved a natural judge on Channel Seven's *My Restaurant Rules* and gave a helpful prod to wayward restaurateurs on Channel Nine's *The Chopping Block*. It was inevitable that the genre's juggernaut, *MasterChef*, would scoop him up for 2011, and he is looking forward to more time in his whites as a mentor this season.

He has always been recognisable – TV critic Ruth Ritchie, a friend, describes him as "visually obvious, a lighthouse" – but the past few years of television exposure have brought him the fame usually reserved for actors and singers. How he handles it depends on whom you ask. "I'm sure he enjoys it," says brother Anthony. Kirk Pengilly, who has had some experience of the limelight, says, "Matt's very comfortable with fame."

Speaking with Moran, you aren't so sure. He's great in a crowd like at Victor Churchill's, and he tweets his 14,500-plus Twitter followers incessantly – "On a plane back to syd! And sitting next to #leosayer what a legend!" But there are drawbacks: drunks hassling him in airport taxi lines and a "sexy chef" label that irks. "I know there's some sort of appeal there. Girls fawn over you when they get a photo – they can get a photo straight on or turn and rub their boobs into you. Years ago I was asked to do that Cleo [Bachelor of the Year] thing or whatever, but there's no way." In the end, it is what it is. "You're recognised, so you just deal with it."

While he tolerates the spotlight, he increasingly wants his family out of it. His first cookbook, *Matt Moran*, featured pictures of his kids; his second, *When I Get Home*, had fewer; his latest has none. He sings his wife's praises – he's quick to report that the half-American Hopkins, a lawyer at the Aboriginal Legal Service in Sydney and author of two novels, passed the New York bar exam at 23 and is the granddaughter of former US president Franklin Roosevelt's closest adviser, Harry Hopkins – but is less willing to talk about their marriage. He did reveal to *The Australian Women's Weekly* last year that his schedule has an impact, saying Hopkins told him one night, "It's just all about what's happening around you and I'm feeling a bit lonely."

"There's a huge trade-off when you run a successful business," says friend Anthony Puharich, CEO of meat wholesaler Vic's Meat. "It's something that weighs on Matt quite heavily." Moran, whose children's names are inked onto his biceps, says it's "game on" when he's home.

So why not just slow down? Puharich says his mate is driven by his passion for food. "If you were to cut Matt's heart open, there'd be truffles and foie gras. That's what's brought him happiness. That's what's brought him success." Moore says money is a factor, and Moran does enjoy the finer things in life: ski trips to Aspen, the Ducatis and, as friends note, a love of shopping, particularly for designer wristwatches. The "rags" at the start of his rise to riches also play a part. "He makes jokes about his schooling but he has a strong sense that he missed out on something ... that he had to come up from behind," says Hopkins. "Out of that came an extraordinary work ethic."

Is it ego? "It's ego that makes me want to go to New York, there's no question about that," Moran says of his dreams to cook in his favourite city. "But I don't need a million places with my name on them." So, what does drive him? "I just love the idea of building something."

Michael De Laurence recalls an early flash of that pluck. Sitting across from a rough kid from Blacktown in the dining room of La Belle Helene, he wasn't so sure about Matt Moran. He remembers looking the big guy up and down and thinking, "Is he going to have the drive to do this job?" But he decided to give him a chance. "I said, 'Look, I'll put you on trial for a couple of days this weekend.'" He remembers 15-year-old Matt Moran's response very clearly: "That won't be necessary," he said. "You won't be disappointed." (9)

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