

Musical taste

On first impressions, Chris Stubbs could pass as Good Charlotte's third twin. Yet, the husky-voiced, heavily tattooed Harley rider is not what he appears. One thing's for sure though, after listening to the entrepreneur talk about his business empire for a few minutes, you'll want to work for him.

As a school leaver, it was a passion for design, food and management that drove Stubbs to pursue a place at the highly regarded William Angliss Institute. "I feel very lucky to have attended William Angliss, which is a culinary institute in Melbourne. It was here I cut my teeth in the hospitality industry and I really can't speak highly enough of their program," says Stubbs. "It was the foundation of my career that taught me how to fuse business and food." And then he found a clever way to combine hospitality with his other passion—rock and roll.

"I was very fortunate. When I was in Melbourne at William Angliss, I worked with a very young promoter down there and ended up catering on my first tour with none other than Tom Jones,"

beams Stubbs. "When that finished I was asked to help cater backstage for Cliff Richard. I was hooked. It was just the best life, touring with rock bands. It was very cool and very sexy—there was no doubt. At that point, it was forged in my mind about where I wanted to go from a food point of view." And that was creating food for large-scale events.

A career that started in Melbourne quickly ventured to the big smoke—Sydney. "I had this desire to come to Sydney, so landed here in 1998 and just fell in love with everything, the lifestyle and the culinary scene. I was appointed to the culinary team for the Olympics working with a San Diego based caterer, where I also worked on several overseas projects such as the Extreme Games in Philadelphia and Los Angeles, the winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, the summer Olympics in Athens, which all were a mind-blowingly fantastic and gave me hands-on experience, helping me fine tune my craft"

Back in Sydney, Stubbs continued working with some of the biggest names in the entertainment business. "I without a doubt gravitated towards large-scale event catering. And I'm still loving it, still doing it, still heavily booked. We've just finished working with Ellie

Nic Hogan goes pillion and hammers down with charismatic catering king, Chris Stubbs



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Goulding, Taylor Swift, and James Blunt and have been confirmed to be working with One Direction again. I've got the Eagles coming up, we've got the Rolling Stones tour ... I'm really privileged, particularly with the Rolling Stones. It's the third time for us with the band. It's an incredible experience to work with these guys, and with the Eagles, so yeah, it's fantastic fun."

It's this fizzy exuberance, some cheekiness and a whole lot of nerve that propelled Stubbs to leave the security of his job back in 2002 to start up his own catering business, Bayleaf. "It was a gutsy move, especially back then," admits Stubbs. "It was just me, cooking, working as a kitchen hand, selling it, trying to make it work. It literally started out of a garage in Five Dock. Thankfully, the business took off and I moved out of the garage within six months."

The recipe to his success is in the way he does business. "I think Bayleaf catering gained traction because of the bands, because of my reputation. They knew with me that I would deliver."

Stubbs stopped at nothing to make it work. "There was a lot of blood, sweat and tears. In hospitality, and tourism in general, you're looking at pulling big hours, monster hours. It's a super challenging industry."

And you have to network at every opportunity. "I built up my business from

being on the job—literally from cooking, from talking to venues, talking to tour managers, talking to everyone and anyone, just pushing this young business. I was incredibly fortunate people backed me straight away; I don't know many businesses that would get that today. But back then, there was demand for a quality caterer in Sydney able to do backstage catering."

Yet as Blink 182 belted out a tune about rollercoasters, Bayleaf event catering hit their first uphill battle since opening two years prior.

"When I started Bayleaf it was always focused solely on backstage catering. The business model was all about reacting to the backstage demands. We were touring with Big Day Out, the Livid festival and other large events," says Stubbs. "Unfortunately for us, that trajectory changed in 2004 with the change of ownership of Acer Arena and other venues in New South Wales whose management groups didn't allow external caterers. So this forced us to restructure the business and we had to react very quickly. It was sink or swim."

"From this point on, backstage catering was narrowed down to the Sydney Entertainment Centre, the Hordern Pavilion and a few smaller venues. The impact was that some very prominent

catering companies closed down—Blue Rock Catering, Rockpool Catering and a few other smaller caterers—decided to close. The squeeze was on to survive and I knew we had to put another hat on."

That meant diversifying into the corporate catering market. "We'd been in business for only two years and underwent a major restructure—going from being a rock 'n' roll tour caterer to a corporate caterer who also did rock 'n' roll catering," explains Stubbs. "With that we changed our entire workforce. I brought on board two senior business development managers who had come out of other catering companies with a mandate to introduce us as a brand into the corporate marketplace where we hadn't been before."

It was a spark of genius. "It was met with an enormous amount of success due to the fact our main competitors decided to close, leaving a gap in the market. It's a beautiful analogy, but it was 'right time, right place' and we went to market with a really strong product, which is banqueting—my expertise—so we adapted very easily to it. Thankfully we got on the panel at Playbill Venues, which is all the Moore Park venues, and that's where we secured our footing in big banqueting in New South Wales."

However, the move from catering for the likes of Michael Jackson to catering for corporate events was wccertainly



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not black and white. “There’s definitely some fundamentals that are similar. However, banqueting is a very unique beast. There’s an enormous amount of components involved in putting on a banquet for 2000 people; things can go wrong. We’re fortunate we have a combination of my experience and the solid team around me—we can and do deliver. It’s a massive effort to make sure we deliver safe food, a safe event,

delivering 100 per cent for the client and making sure we make money,” says Stubbs. The proof is, as they say, in the pudding. “Twelve years on, we are still doing banqueting of up to 5000 people around Australia, so we’re very much seen as a big event caterer.”

Stubbs’s catering empire now encompasses Star Grazers (the rock and roll backstage catering company), Bayleaf event catering (large-scale banqueting for corporate clientele) and most recently, Stubbs has ventured into a partnership with acclaimed chef Warren Turnbull.

“The next exciting phase of our expansion is our partnership with Warren who is a hatted chef from Assiette and Banc fame (and the wildly successful Chur Burger), and now he works with us, offering bespoke menus and event concepts. Does that add value to our business? Hell yeah. He’s a culinary genius, so we’re over the moon he’s come on board.” Another clever business move.

“When we made the decision to separate Bayleaf and Star Grazers, what we identified was that our corporate clients wanted more than just a caterer who can deliver. Reacting to that, we introduced two tiers of catering—we have our first tier, headed by Dwight Peters, our executive chef of the group, and then we have our platinum tier headed by War-

Opposite page: Warren Turnbull has teamed up with Stubbs to create bespoke menus and concepts. Above: Bayleaf executive chef Dwight Peters.

ren Turnbull, which gives our clients the hatted chef component at home or at a venue. It’s a gutsy move because we’re literally doing fine dining for 10-to-3000 people. The technical component is intense, as well as teaming that with our sommelier, Christopher Hayes—it’s the full food and wine experience. It’s challenging, but the journey has been amazing moving forward.”

It has been a long way to the top, but Stubbs believes the key is to keep asking questions and to keep evolving.

“Communication is key,” he says. “Just talking, researching ... that’s part of what I do. I think that’s why we’re here today, as well as trying to figure out trends. We’ve been in the business for 12 years and we’ve had three restructures and we’ve traded through a global financial crisis.”

Mick Jagger says you can’t always get what you want, but Stubbs begs to differ. “I love what I do and because we don’t have shareholders, it’s just the family, I’ll definitely be doing this in five years’ time. I’ll probably restructure again and again and still be delivering amazing food and enjoying touring backstage with our team.”