

Robert Molines

The Hunter Valley in New South Wales is synonymous with fine dining. We talk to the pioneer who introduced gastronomic glory to the region

In France to enter the hospitality industry—as a hotelier, a sommelier, concierge, chef, a waiter—it's almost like part of the fabric. In our country, you're brought up in food and eating the same things as your parents as soon as you can eat solids. You become very knowledgeable in flavours and you develop an instinct for it. In my case, it was a matter of choosing not to go to boarding school anymore and to enter a catering institution. My stepfather coincidentally was the chef for the palace of Monaco. There was always this heritage between my stepfather, who is Italian, and my extended Italian family who used to come and visit often. That melting pot was definitely something that drove me to a career in food.

My first job was in Villefranche-sur-Mer at La Marinere, a popular tourist restaurant right on the beach. What I learnt there, as a kitchen apprentice, was endurance. Going to work for long hours, day and night at the age of 15, it is something at first you say, 'My god! It's dragging on', but you learn how to endure it by being captivated. You realise it is six days a week and there is no relaxation. I went on to say to some of my colleagues that to be a chef was like entering the priesthood—you are dedicated, you already know what to expect even though you haven't been there, you know because you are immersed every day of your life by the industry and the people in it.

When I came to Australia back in 1968, I saw the food evolution happening in Sydney and I eventually moved to the Hunter Valley. That would have been a highlight in my life to make such a decision at only 22 years of age. In fact, my life has been a journey of coincidental moves, from being the first chef and restaurateur in the Hunter Valley to have marked eras of progress. My first restaurant was for a company who sold wine called Saxonvale, I then moved on to establish The Cellar Restaurant in 1978 and that was a turning point in the Valley—the introduction of fine dining. Then I ran Rothbury Estate, for the late Len Evans, for 10 years and my association with him was enormously rich. Then I created

Pepper Tree with my wife Sally and two other partners, where Robert's restaurant was born. This was another highlight and evolutionary time for the region because it was the first commercial tourism aspect for the Valley. Peppers became the first luxury guesthouse in 1984.

I've overcome many challenges—creating Pepper Tree when you have an interest rate of 15 to 20 per cent, combating recessions, fringe benefit tax, and having nearly seven million dollars worth of debt. There are always challenges. Sometimes people would say to me, 'Do you know what you're doing?' and I would turn my head and say, 'Of course!' but in the back of my mind I'm thinking, 'Please god'.

As I get a little bit older—I'm 63 this month—I reflect on my relationships. When I have a request, it is without any intention other than that the relationship works both ways. I help a lot of people not because I want to be paid back, but because it's my intention to help others and to be a genuine person of care. And somehow in that, it's so accidental but you forge a relationship over many years. Where there is trust with one another and where there is no self-indulgence in whatever you do, it's like a shared connection. You share your joy and you share your sorrow. And everybody knows I'm not a one-way swimmer; my motto has always been the same. I share the same sentiment with my staff. I'd rather give them more rather than not enough because I want them to trust me.

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It might sound a bit stupid but money does not really interest me a lot. As long as bills are paid, as long as we (my wife Sally and I) have a comfortable life, greed is not me. You can imagine over the years how many chefs I've trained and I'm proud to say, not because of me but because of their own self, they all have restaurants, they all do very well and they are all very well regarded. ●

