

The simple things

E'cco Bistro's owner and head chef Philip Johnson lifts the lid on his "keep it simple" philosophy

Words by Melanie Gardener; Photography by Glenn Weiss

E'cco Bistro first opened its doors in 1995 in an anticipated move that saw Philip Johnson embark on a journey that led to the formulation of his recipe for success. Originally from New Zealand, Philip moved to Brisbane in the early 1980s after finishing his apprenticeship. Not from a family of chefs — Philip's parents owned a series of motor garages and he had briefly considered a career as an aviation engineer — at first the young apprentice viewed his training as nothing more than a means to an end.

"Initially it was just a job," he says candidly. "I didn't mind it but there was no real passion there." So what was the catalyst for igniting the passion? "I went to England and it was there that my imagination was sparked and I decided I wanted a career in food."

That decision led to a stellar career that has seen Philip venture outside the kitchen and take on new challenges. As well as his duties as owner and head chef of the internationally renowned E'cco Bistro, Philip regularly travels overseas to update and refine his skills, conducts numerous cooking classes and demonstrations, donates his services to charity and contributes recipes to a variety of publications. In addition, Philip is the author of five cookbooks, with his latest offering, *Decadence*, devoted entirely to dessert.

Talking to Philip today it's easy to feel the passion and zeal he has for his chosen profession, so I want to know how influential his childhood was and what eventually sparked his interest in food and cooking.

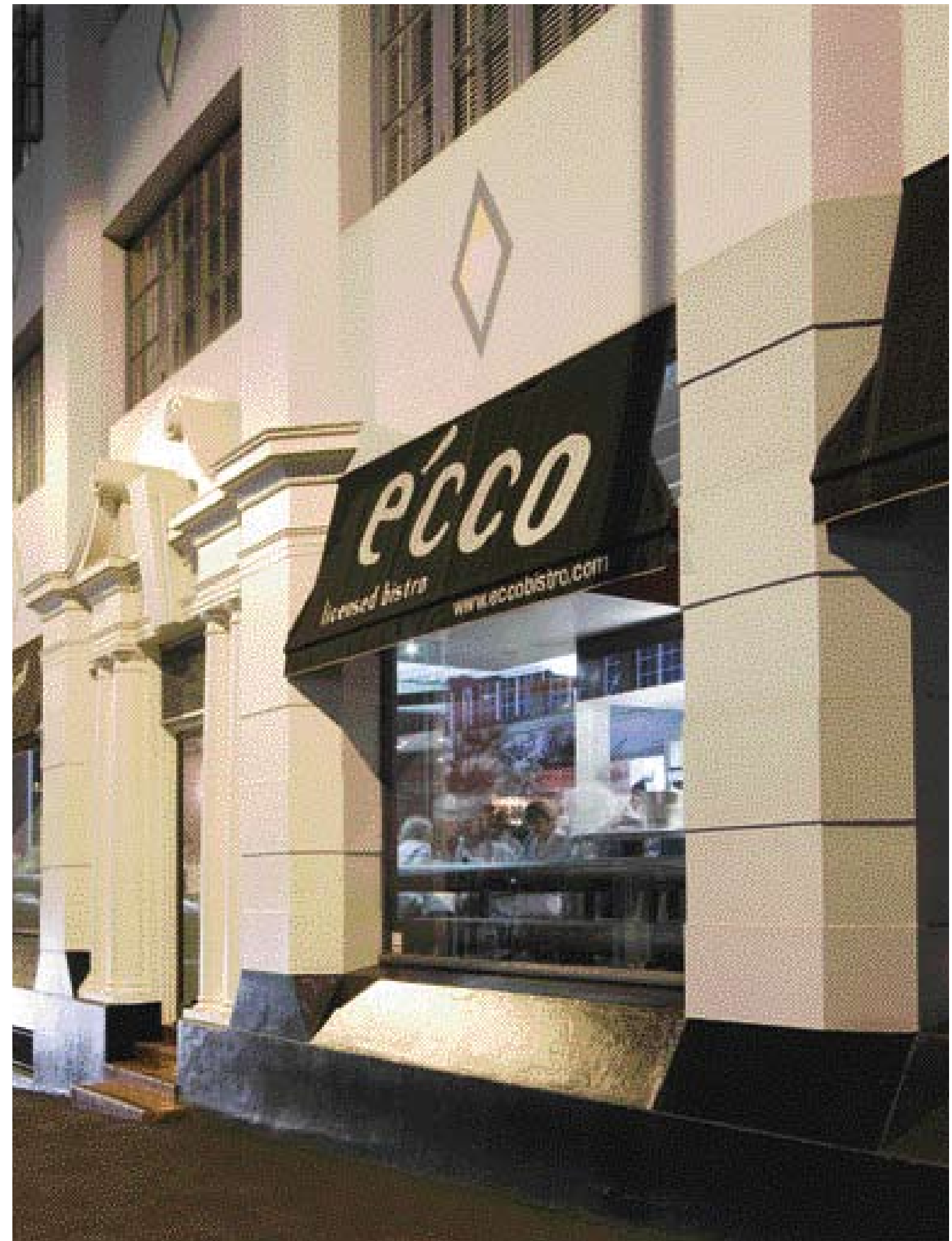
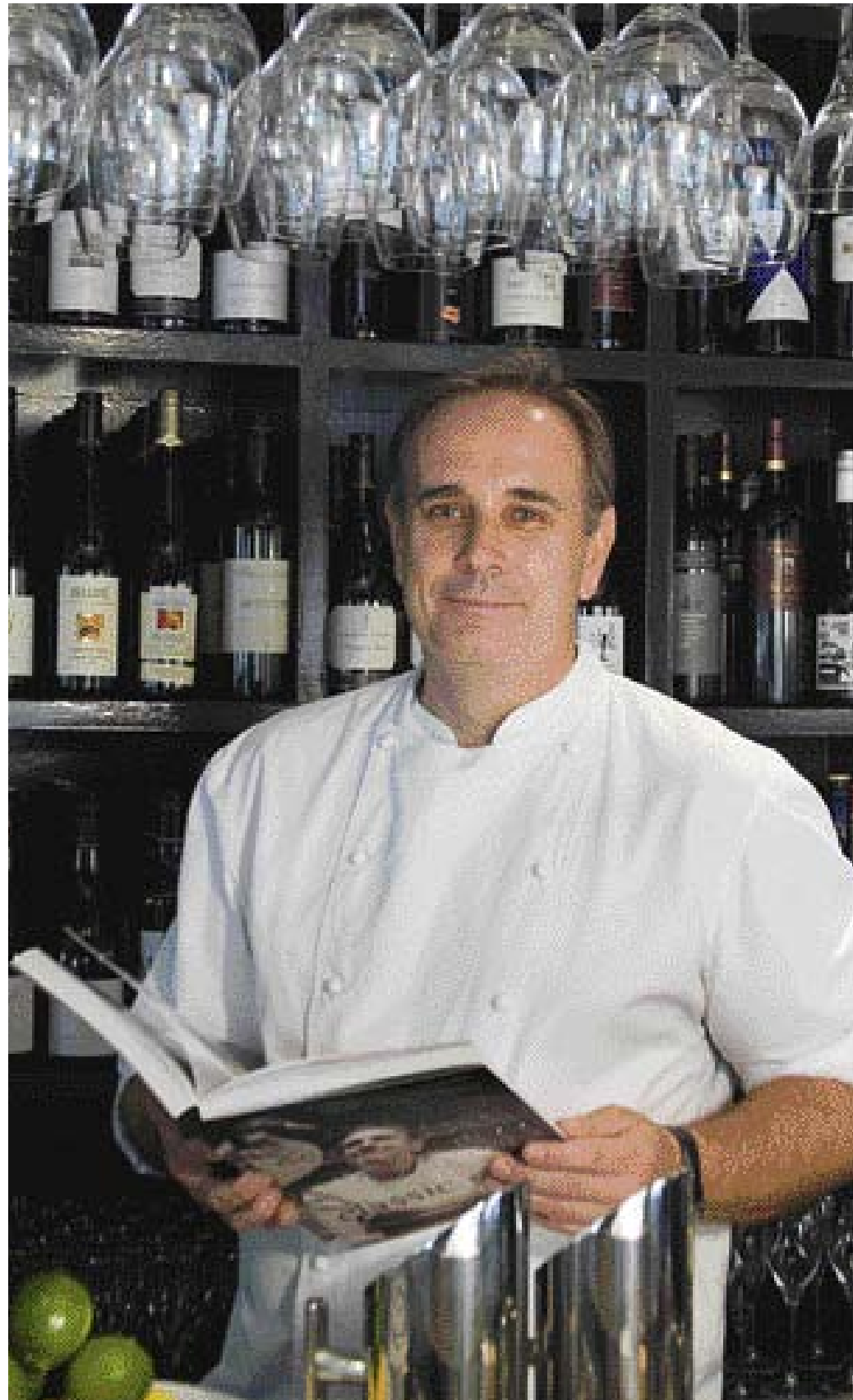
"I actually did a lot of cooking at home when I was a kid," he says. "My mum was not well and my Grandma was a great cook, so I sort of fell into it. She let me do lots of stuff and I guess as a child when you get appreciated, you tend to want to do it more."

It was during a trip to picturesque French town Béziers that Philip discovered the true bistro style that he was to recreate so successfully in Brisbane. "I was captivated by the environment and didn't want to leave," he says. "It was at that moment that I knew what direction my restaurant would take."

But the real story began later, after Philip had launched E'cco. "I'd opened a restaurant called Le Bronx, a French restaurant in New Farm, then I took on E'cco," he explains. "I remember buying *The River Cafe Cook Book* and I was amazed at how Rose Gray viewed food. At that time, meals were all heavily garnished but her food was all flavour and produce-based. It completely changed my mindset."

So much so that in 1997 Philip set off for London and spent some time working with Rose and partner Ruth Rogers at The River Cafe.

Uncluttered, simple food has become Philip's



trademark with numerous accolades testifying to the success of his style. In 1997, just two years after launching E'cco, Philip received the Remy Martin/*Australian Gourmet Traveller* "Restaurant of the Year" award and the following year won "Best Restaurant Brisbane CBD" in the *Courier Mail* Restaurant Awards. From there, a number of American Express awards followed culminating in his induction into the American Express Hall of Fame in 2001. More recently, *Gourmet Traveller Restaurant Guide* gave E'cco a two-star rating and the number one ranking in Brisbane. In addition, 2008 saw E'cco receive a number of HostPlus Restaurant & Catering Awards for Excellence.

Philip's description of his signature style is as uncomplicated as his menu. "We do as little as possible with the best ingredients available," he says.

You have to be realistic about what sort of cooking you do at home.

"I want to produce food that is honest, wholesome and full of flavour."

Given this stance and the fact that there are only 24 hours in a day, I want to know how Philip juggles his myriad tasks and what he enjoys most about his career. "I think doing a variety of things has given my career longevity," he explains. "All work and no play can make things very dull and I feel it's necessary to have other outlets. Because we were lucky enough to start winning awards I was able to progress into books, guest chef opportunities and cooking demonstrations, then step into consultancy."

He pauses for a moment then adds, "I think one of the hardest things for a chef to do is to come out of the kitchen and do other things. Not only does this provide variety and keep things fresh but it gives the people who work for me a chance to do their

share. It's a combined effort, so I make sure I involve them all."

It's not surprising that Philip usually chooses something simple to cook for guests when entertaining at home. "I do a lot of cooking in the restaurant, so I don't do too much at home," he says. "Something simple like a grill or barbecue with some salad would be my choice."

This leads me to ask about Philip's kitchen at home and to delve a little into what he loves and what he would change. "It's not everyone's ideal but we used stainless steel throughout our kitchen," he informs me. "I particularly like it. It costs more but I wanted a continuous flow of stainless steel along the benchtop and with integrated sinks. We have two very large sinks and we oriented the breakfast bar so we could face guests. I also wanted higher benchtops. I'm six-foot tall, so I need the height."

One question I can never resist asking a professional chef is what they see lacking in today's residential kitchen design and it's a particularly apt question in this case because Philip has taken on yet



another consulting role, this time helping developer Stockwell to design a kitchen for a new project.

"I think people are generally taller these days," he muses, "so I prefer to have benches slightly higher than the norm. 950mm is generally better than the standard 900mm and I'd go to one metre if the owners are very tall. One thing I do miss in a residential kitchen is a decent amount of set down area. You need space to lay out plates."

"I'd always incorporate induction cooking because the degree of control you can achieve is fantastic and you can't always get that with gas or electricity. With induction you can be almost point perfect and for gentle cooking it's very exact and even. Plus there is no build-up of heat, so it's great for safety."

Taking a breath, he continues: "I'd also want a sink

with a decent depth so you can fit a big pot into it and I think a warming drawer is a great thing. So often in a recipe you see a note to keep something warm but where, in a residential kitchen, can you do this? You could use the oven on a low heat but that's not very efficient. I also prefer a wall oven to be at eye level in a domestic situation."

"Last, I think you need to orient the kitchen so you can face guests. Commercially, we often cook facing the wall. This is for practical reasons such as extraction, but at home that's quite odd. You would want to be able to face people when cooking as it's more logical. It means needing to install extraction over the top, but it is well worth it."

It is easy to see why this man's opinions are so heavily sought. Not only does he have plenty of

them, but he shares these ideas openly and honestly with his years of experience obviously a major contributing factor.

"Don't go too commercial in a residential kitchen," he advises. "It can look impressive but you have to be realistic about what sort of cooking you do at home. Traditionally, a lot of European ovens are small as they're designed for apartment kitchens, so bear this in mind, whether you're buying imported or local, and consider a wider oven as they can take a wider tray."

Luckily, Philip is very happy with his kitchen at home and would only make small changes to the space. "For the amount of cooking we do at home," he says, "we've pretty much got what we want. The only thing I might add is a small, deep fryer in the bench and if money was no object I'd probably upgrade to a Rationale [commercial brand] oven."

Philip is refreshingly frank about overseas design trends and the influence they have in Australia. "There's no doubt that overseas designs have great attributes but you need to look at the best ideas you can find and run with that rather than trying to re-create designs exactly," he says. "Ideas can come from anywhere and it's your lifestyle so it should fit."

The last word goes to Philip whose bistro philosophy can so easily be applied to our efforts at entertaining at home. "I have never strayed far from my original ideas and beliefs," he says. "The key is to evolve but show restraint."

Who, what, where

E'CCO BISTRO

100 Boundary Street, Brisbane Qld 4000

Phone (07) 3831 8344

Fax (07) 3831 8460

Website www.eccobistro.com