

Sun Life

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A close-up photograph of a man with short brown hair and a bright smile, holding a white egg over his right eye. He is wearing a white t-shirt. The background is a solid yellow color.

THE MAN WHO MADE EGGS SEXY

WHY KEANU, CATE
AND BAZ LOVE
BILL GRANGER

**FASHION'S MOST
SPECTACULAR MOMENTS**

**DIARY OF A
(SPRING) DETOX**

Bill Granger cracked the morning restaurant scene with simple scrambled eggs. Now Kylie, Cate and Leonardo want him for breakfast. By **RACHAEL OAKES-ASH**. Photography by **STEVE BACCON**

THE BILL, PLEASE

YOU KNOW THAT A MAN'S committed when he sticks around for breakfast. Bill Granger sticks around; in fact, you can't get rid of him. Kylie's had him, Cate had him every day for a week, Tom and Nicole have had him together and Leonardo had him delivered every morning while filming with Baz.

In Manhattan, they call him "the egg master of Sydney", thanks to *The New York Times*; in London, they know him as the man "naked chef" Jamie Oliver has brekkie with down under. And here, he's just Bill, the bloke who introduced communal dining to the local restaurant scene and whose fluffy scrambled eggs and sweet ricotta hotcakes have people queuing outside his self-titled Sydney cafe. Basically, Granger has made breakfast sexy, as proven by the large piles of fan mail collected over the years. One Japanese visitor said his pancakes "changed my life". Another couple admitted to having withdrawal symptoms and needing "a Bills fix". "I think they should extend the Nobel Peace Prize to Bill's eggs," entrepreneur Harry M Miller once said.

Today, I've been invited to witness the talents of the Melbourne-born chef first hand. Granger is making buttermilk pancakes fresh from the pages of his new book, *Bills Food*. He tosses the first batch into the bin. "The first lot never works out properly," he says, speaking from his McMahons Point home. "The staff wonder whether he can cook sometimes," interjects documentary producer Natalie Elliot, his partner of five years. Meanwhile, their two-year-old daughter, Edie, stands on a chair by the stove mimicking her dad's every action. Edie is her

father's child: her first words were "yummy" and "tasty" and I anticipate the same words coming soon from my mouth.

Bill and Natalie, both 33, met at his Darlinghurst cafe and within four weeks they'd bought a ring, dress and suit and planned a wedding that never happened. Instead, they moved in together and are expecting their second child later this year. Today they're wearing matching Converse sneakers - cute.

Watching him work is like experiencing the next evolutionary moment. Miraculously, avocado on wood-fired bread drizzled with olive oil joins my pancakes on the white table.

"I guess I've made eggs famous in their own right by bringing them out of the carton," laughs Granger, whose first book, *Sydney Food*, has sold more than 72,000 copies worldwide since it was released two years ago. "Eggs are ubiquitous, a base ingredient. I'm glad I've raised their profile.

"Because I'm more home cooking, none of the other chefs worry about me," says Granger, who's turned down numerous TV offers. "Those boys can end up with such big egos. I'm more a self-taught cook than a chef."

It's 9am and he's been up for three hours, buying ingredients and flowers for Bills and Bills 2, the Surry Hills restaurant he opened in 1996. "Luckily, I'm a morning person," he chuckles, as we drive towards Darlinghurst. "On one of my first dates with Natalie, I woke her up at 6am to see the sunrise at Bondi."

When Granger enters his cafe - a white, bright space dominated by a long oak table - customers glance his way. They're keen to see the chef who's seduced their tastebuds for years and

Bill Granger, at his original signature restaurant, has eased off on work to spend more time with his family.





be on a first-name basis with the man who needs no surname. "Hi, Gayle," he calls out to a middle-aged regular. "She's been coming every morning since the day we opened," says Granger. "Trouble with some regulars is everyone knows my name because it's on the door, but while I know their lives, kids and schedules, I don't always remember their names."

Bills cafe, now nine years old, is an institution. Every morning, inner-city creative types mingle with tourists. Corporate execs, Double Bay wives and the occasional international celebrity (think Keanu Reeves and Julia Roberts, along with locals such as Baz Luhrmann) sit side by side with art students nursing hangovers. Two 30-something men in laceless trainers compare business notes at the communal table. The air is filled with the sweet smell of freshly cut magnolias and honeycomb butter.

Behind the shelf lined with plump muffins is the cramped, open-plan kitchen. Two chefs, a kitchen hand and a bustle of waiters manoeuvre around the stoves. Head chef Kath Townsend wears make-up, aware that the customers can see in. There's no room for tantrums here. When Granger arrives, they hardly flinch. They're above that, and so is Granger.

"When big parties are on, like Mardi Gras, it's really fun in here," says Granger. "We pop on the music and all bop around. There's always a great mix of people. We've never had to kick anyone out; people are pretty well behaved at breakfast."

Granger's staff sing his praises and former employees often return to eat at his restaurants. "I'll be cooking in the kitchen and know Bill's walked in because the energy level lifts," says Townsend. Another staffer tells me that a mother who ate at Bills regularly, because her dying son was at nearby St Vincent's Hospital, wrote him a thank-you note after he sent her child some food, free of charge. "It was his last meal," she wrote.

Despite his success, Granger says the restaurant business rarely brings in big money. He rents his home, having sunk his house deposit into promoting his books, an investment he hopes will pay off better than Sydney's over-inflated real estate market. "Sydney is all about status: status watch, car, clothes," says

BILL'S SCRAMBLED EGGS: THE SECRET

Make sure you choose free-range eggs and use lots of cream. The key is a lot of liquid – you can also use milk or skim milk – as it makes them fluffy. Cook quickly on high heat and remember that nothing's better than eggs cooked in a good non-stick pan.



Granger puts in some kitchen time with daughter Edie; the stars Bills has fed include Cate Blanchett (above left) and Leonardo di Caprio.

Granger. "It makes you want to react against it. I remember once, when we were living at the Horizon Apartments [a swanky address], the fire alarm went off. We were standing outside in our pyjamas holding our daughter, surrounded by people who'd considered their Gucci stilettos and Chloe coats must-haves when fleeing a life-threatening situation," he says.

Recently, Granger has considered returning to his home town. "Having a child is the first time we've thought about going to Melbourne for quality of life. It's cheaper and the houses are beautiful. There's a different food scene in Melbourne. It's getting more interesting again."

BY ALL RIGHTS, GRANGER SHOULD HAVE been a butcher. Born in 1969 in Mentone, he is a fifth generation William and his forefathers were all butchers. As a child, he remembers helping out at the abattoir, "sorting the offal" for his dad. (Today, the only sign of the butcher in Granger is his penchant for white clothing, which he keeps impeccably clean.) Granger's father remembers his son always cooking. At the age of five, he'd serve his parents breakfast in bed with all the trimmings. "It was silver service with flowers on the tray," reminisces Bill snr. When he was 10, the family (Granger has a younger brother, Steven) moved to a 120 hectare farm, Rossmoyne Park, 42km south-east of Melbourne, where his father worked cattle and sold meat. There, Granger perfected his skills using recipes from old *Australian Women's Weekly* cooking-card boxes. "We'd have dinner parties for eight people and he'd do all the cooking," recalls Bill snr, laughing.

Granger credits his mother's adventurous tastes ("She used to make pesto") in helping him develop his kitchen skills. When he was 13, his mother, Patricia, was admitted to hospital for alcoholism and depression. "Before then she'd controlled her addiction, but eventually it became too debilitating," says Granger. "Mum was a vegetarian in a family of meat eaters and I remember Dad saying, 'I wish we could find meat product in beer.' She was always jovial and social but I never knew her not to be drinking. I just thought that was the way it was until I got older and realised it was a problem. I suggested she see a doctor and she did. She hasn't touched a drop since."

After life on the farm, Granger longed for some action. At 18, he studied architecture briefly in Melbourne before heading



OMELETTE WITH GOAT'S CURD AND SAGE

3 eggs
1 tsp butter, for greasing the pan
85g goat's curd*
1 tbsp fresh sage leaves
sea salt
freshly ground black pepper

Break the eggs into a medium bowl, add 1 tbsp water and beat lightly with a fork until just combined.

Heat a non-stick frying pan over a medium-to-high heat. Add the butter and swirl to coat the pan. Pour in the eggs and, as they begin to cook, use a wooden spoon to carefully drag the cooked egg to the centre, allowing the uncooked mixture to flow towards the edges. Repeat a second time (this will take only a minute).

When the omelette is nearly cooked (with the eggs still wet on top), add the goat's curd and sage leaves in a line down the centre. Season with salt and pepper, then fold the sides of the omelette over the filling. Slide onto a plate and serve with crusty bread. Serves 1.

* You can also use soft cheeses such as ricotta or grated emmenthal.

north. "I had friends there." He'd scored 100 per cent in art in his final school exams and decided to join the City Art Institute (now the College of Fine Arts at the University of NSW). There, he hooked up with fellow student and model Annalise Braakensiek who, in a way, helped him find his feet. "During one summer holiday, he joined me in Tokyo," she says. "He was inspired by the Japanese lifestyle and got his first idea for communal dining."

The moment he returned home, Granger, then 22, dropped out of art school and starting waiting tables. "I worked at [Surry Hills restaurant] La Passion Du Fruit. The owner, Christine Juliet, used to love the way I cooked so let me run the restaurant three nights a week. I'd rent it from her and friends would drop by. I didn't make any money but it gave me a taste."

In 1993, armed with \$30,000 borrowed against his grandfather's insurance policy, he opened Bills in Liverpool Street. "I couldn't think of a name and all my friends would ask, 'How's Bill's place going?' So, I called it Bills."

Council restrictions ended up defining his cuisine, limiting

"I used to go to nightclubs and think I should be enjoying them. Restaurants are more my scene"

him to breakfast and lunch. "I couldn't open nights or Sundays and could only seat 34 people. I had to do simple, tasty food." With friend and designer Brian Kiernan they decided on one shared table, a concept that's since "been copied to death", according to food writer Jill Dupleix. "We used to take everyone who arrived from New York, London or Paris to Bills," says Dupleix. "It was like a test - if you get this, then you get good food and good people. But if you're wondering, 'Why are we only going to a cafe?' then you'll never get it."

His first major function was a Christmas party for *Harper's Bazaar* at a Darling Point park. "We set up a huge table and dressed it magnificently," Granger remembers. "It was really lush and we were standing around waiting for the guests to arrive. Two hours later we found out we were a week early. We had a big party that night and had to set it all up again a week later. Sure, it cost me a bit but I've never been good with

catering for functions. That's so me, working in chaos."

A few years later, after opening his second restaurant, "which caters to a more trendy, media crowd", his chaotic life got the better of him. "I used to smoke a lot of dope to unwind, and eventually got depressed," says Granger, who checked himself into a clinic for two weeks. "People say there's nothing wrong with it but there is; it's a depressive." His parents took over the business for a few months while he recovered. "It was really just time out," he says now. "Initially, I worried because there's a history of depressive illness in my family but seeing other people in hospital made me realise I wasn't that bad. Also, it was great to sleep in for a while and not have to get up for breakfasts!"

These days, Granger leads a healthy, quiet life. "I used to go to nightclubs and think I should be enjoying them. Restaurants are more my scene now - they're nightclubs for people in their 30s." Recently, he pulled out of a partnership with Melbourne-born Maurice Terzini, who started Melbourne's *Caffe e Cucina* and popular Sydney restaurant *Otto*. The pair had planned to open a restaurant at the remodelled Bondi Icebergs Club but Granger decided to devote more time to his family and concentrate on his new book.

"That restaurant is going to be one of the best in Australia," he says, with a twinge of regret. "I loved working with Maurice. It was really hard to walk away from that but I realised I wouldn't be a good father or partner if I took it on. You can make money but if other things in your life aren't right, it doesn't matter."

Interestingly, the woman he credits with launching his career, Christine Juliet of *La Passion Du Fruit*, was the only person who refused to comment for this article. "I have nothing to say to you. It's always the same two chefs [who are written about] and that stinks," she says, before hanging up. After spending the day with Granger, I'd be happy if it were just the one chef. He's funny, unpretentious and possesses a real eye for detail and design that floors people daily. In the words of his biggest fan, Jill Dupleix: "I would never queue for anything in my life - except a table at Bills." Move over, Dupleix - you'll have to stand behind me. □ *Bills Food by Bill Granger is published by Murdoch Books, \$34.95.*