

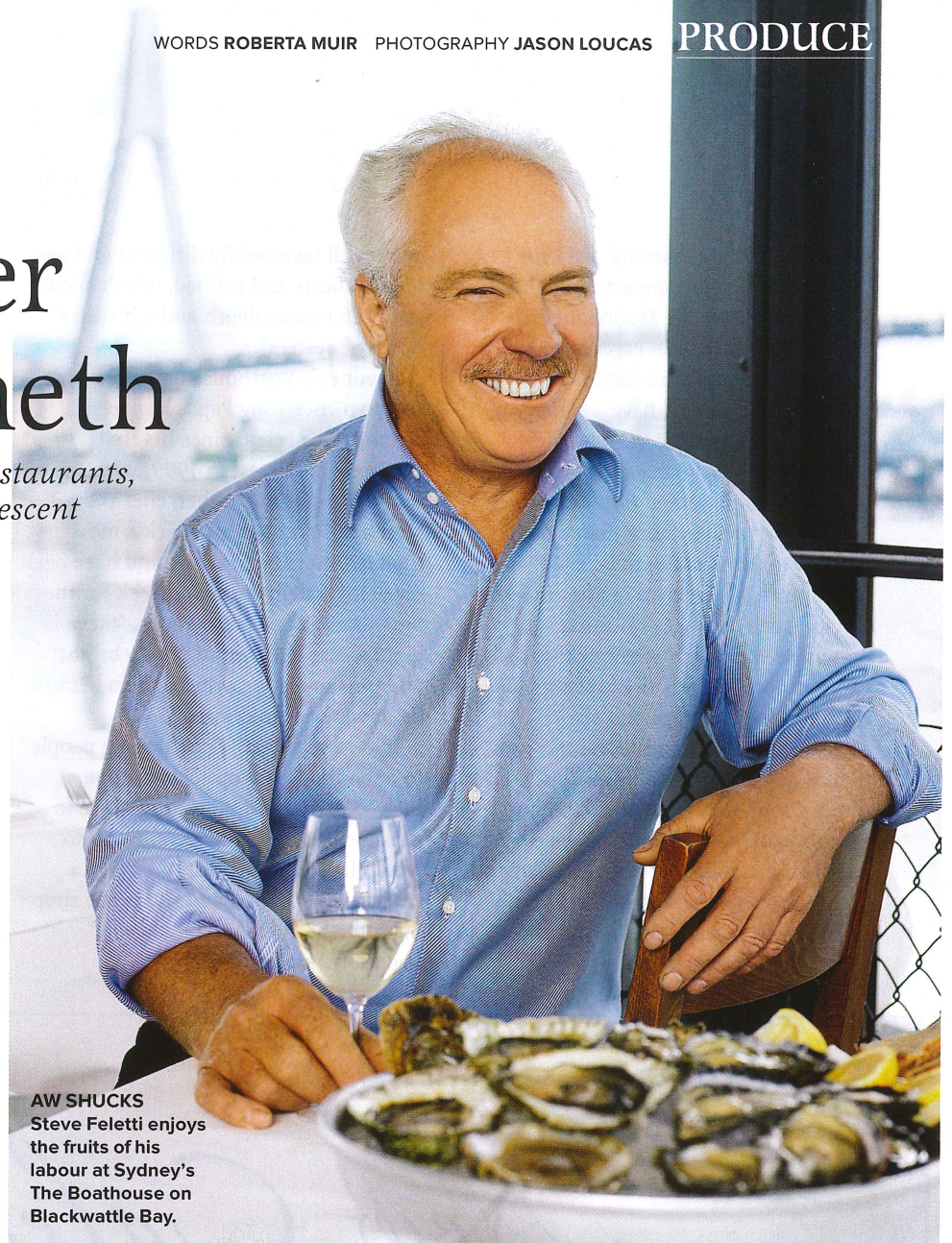
The oyster man cometh

Oyster man to Australia's top restaurants, Steve Feletti, is giving our pearlescent beauties a French polish.

Steve Feletti is a man obsessed, and the object of his obsession is oysters native to Australia. The news that DNA testing has confirmed suspicions that our angasi is almost identical to France's legendary *belon* has him particularly excited. "For local oyster devotees this is like finding native truffles in our backyard," he says. Then there's the more common Sydney rock oyster: "In this frightening world of shrinking bio-diversity, our native rock oyster is a real food landmark, with a unique sweet flavour, unheard of shelf-life, and worthy of passionate support at all levels". Sydney, Feletti believes, is the last great oyster city on the planet. "Where else can you find three commercial species (*angasi*, Sydney rock and Pacific) grown in reputable waters, within a three-hour courier radius of a city offering world-class restaurant presentation at sub-parity world prices?"

Feletti came to oyster farming by way of a sea change, from the Australian Wheat Board, when time in Japan and Europe convinced him that Australia had world-class oysters which were "under-marketed, poorly treated, with dismal delivery to the consumer".

The scary stuff, says Feletti, was realising that if we didn't revolutionise the oyster food experience and generate genuine household demand and an understanding of the differences between oysters, we'd probably lose this food icon in the longer term to competition. The Pacific oyster, which originates in Japan and was introduced into Australia in the 40s, has the economic advantage of being faster growing than native oysters, taking less than two years to reach maturity, whereas Sydney rocks and *angasis* take about three. "The Pacific now accounts for about 85 per cent of table oyster



AW SHUCKS
Steve Feletti enjoys the fruits of his labour at Sydney's The Boathouse on Blackwattle Bay.

production worldwide – you can't kill it with a stick," he says.

Feletti produces four trademarked oysters: an *angasi* under the name of Moonlight Flat Oysters, and three Sydney rocks, Clair de Lune Bouton, Moonlight en Surface and Label Rouge. Brands only work if they stand for something, of course, and Feletti explains that each of his oysters is finished in a different way, to create a different product. "Whether it's wheat, wine, wagyu or cheese, the key to premiums is the same. It's all about the finish. The French cheese and oyster industries both use the term *affinage* for this process." Oysters, being filter feeders, gain a lot of their character from their environment. Feletti had what he refers to as one of his 'eureka moments' while researching France's famous green oysters in Marennes-Oléron. "I realised just how

significantly man can influence the oyster's physical structure. It's not that I want to produce green oysters, but the principle offers huge possibilities in other directions. *Affinage* is my main focus today." So much so that Feletti only grows from scratch about 30 per cent of the oysters he sells, the remainder he buys, part-grown, and 'finishes' them with techniques he's researched in France.

So what are the differences between Feletti's oysters? The Moonlight Flat *angasis* are finished by reverse dunking; being very heat sensitive, they are grown fully submerged, but for several weeks before harvest their racks are placed on rails above the low tide mark and spend part of each day out of water. "They learn to keep their mouths shut," says Feletti. It's essential if they're to have a good shelf life in a restaurant kitchen. ➔

The Clair de Lune 'buttons' are kept small, delivering a compact, briny hit with each oyster. The Moonlight en Surface are finished in cages suspended on plastic floats on the water's surface. They grow larger and have a softer, creamier, less-metallic flavour, while Label Rouge are finished to produce a firmer textured oyster, with more 'bite'.

Feletti provides more than a quality product to some of Australia's top restaurants. He believes in after-market service, such as advice on storage to maximise shelf life - whether they ask for it or not. "He was the first supplier reluctant to supply us, one of Melbourne's busiest restaurants," says Botanical's chef Paul Wilson, "but after much discussion about our handling practices and assurances that we were happy to be guided by him, he relented." The Melbourne market, Wilson says, is flooded with Pacific oysters and their flavours are quite similar, while "Steve's

oysters all taste subtly different and are more delicate and refined, which allows us to offer more depth and a broader range of oysters".

Sydney's Boathouse on Blackwattle Bay co-owner Tony Papas has been dealing with Feletti since his first commercial harvest in 1999, when he sent a sample box to then chef Yvan Meunier. "We sent him back a message the next morning, raving, and have been receiving a delivery every week for the past seven years," says Papas. "Steve is quite a character, prodigiously bright and passionate, growing oysters because he loves the whole thing."

So what's next? Encouraging people to open their own oysters at home, it seems. "It is unthinkable in France to preshuck and wash oysters. To do so would be the equivalent of buying a case of wine and having the bottle shop open the lids before going home." Food for thought. *

WHERE TO TRY THEM

SYDNEY

Bentley Restaurant & Bar

Surry Hills, (02) 9332 2344.

The Boathouse on Blackwattle Bay

Glebe, (02) 9518 9011.

Coast Darling Harbour, (02) 9267 6700.

Flying Fish Pyrmont, (02) 9518 6677.

Four in Hand Paddington,

(02) 9362 1999.

Jonah's Palm Beach, (02) 9974 5599.

Manta Woolloomooloo, (02) 9332 3822.

Pilu at Freshwater Harbord,

(02) 9938 3331.

MELBOURNE

Botanical South Yarra, (03) 9820 7888.

Circa, The Prince St Kilda,

(03) 9536 1122.

Three, One, Two Carlton, (03) 9347 3312.

CANBERRA

The Ginger Room Parkes,

(02) 6270 8262.

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