

## Old Boys' Lunch Speech

It is with great pride and honour that I am here today as your guest speaker and chef.

I was and am still taken back as to why I was asked to be here today, (maybe budget cuts?) as I am not famous, a sporting star, business owner, Nobel peace prize winner, Pulitzer award winner... I still have time to accomplish all of these. What I do I do every day, 12 to 16 hours a day, long nights, weekends and holidays, when everyone else is free, we are working. It is not glamorous, unlike the food network portrays it to be, it is dirty, messy, from scaling and gutting fish, breaking down a pig and deboning meat, cleaning 200 artichokes, scrubbing down the ovens and stoves, sweating in 50 degree heat over a grill, it's stressful, tiring, but it is a rush, rewarding and most of all FUN...

I would like to talk to you about my journey from Christ Church to the food we share and enjoy today.

I graduated in 1999 (just, with a C- in English, not the best result as my brother only the year before won the English prize), as most, if not all of my mates were heading off to uni. I think law was popular that year.

I was unsure, in doubt of the direction I wanted to go and where I wanted to be. Having a strong military family history, my father 30 years in the Navy and also my mother, a few years of Cadets (Senior Sergeant Salmeri of Two Platoon), I was heading to Melbourne to join the Navy. I thought it was going to be like *Top Gun*, cool sunglasses, singing to girls in bars (although that still happens) an exciting adventure awaits. Actually the first 15 weeks were like a scene out of *Full Metal Jacket*, shaved heads and men yelling at you for God knows what and everything seemed so far away for a 17 year old boy from Perth. You grow up fast in this world, with people from all walks of life, living and working together 24 hours a day. I went into the field of communications, at school my teachers said I never shut up, so I thought that would be a good choice... it was here the adventure begins, my first ship being

HMAS Adelaide, it was time to sail the world and we did. It was exciting times, unknown places, exotic foods, smells, cultures. In six years I sailed the globe, but it was not without its dangers as well. In 2001 I'm sure we all remember the children overboard incident, I witnessed and helped firsthand, and a six-month tour in the gulf only weeks after September 11 put my life and everything I know into perspective. But I also loved that not only did we see foreign ports, but also I had the chance to see what an amazing country we have here, living all over Australia - land and sea.

It was during these long, long, long, long days at sea, patrolling Christmas Island that I needed to figure what I wanted to do with my life. I was up for promotion and needed to sign on for another four years... but I knew there was more for me, I needed to follow my passion... I needed to know what it was I loved to do, so I wrote down every book I had read (the list was short), every movie I loved, and what I enjoyed most when I had free time...

- the books were all cook books
- the films were all about mobsters and food
- and I loved nothing more than cooking for family and friends

Light bulb moment... move to Italy and learn to cook.

After leaving the Navy I embarked on a European adventure, three weeks of eating my way through Italy, but also visiting the culinary school I wanted to attend... the only thing I needed was money. Getting a good paying job and fast in Perth in 2005 was easy... only one way... over the next two years, saving every cent I could, working construction on the mines... not so different from the Navy, just a lot of red dust and a lot more money. I had one goal, culinary school and Italy... I believe that is what got me through it... that and the Italian cook-up we used to have outside my donga... on an electric grill with a few Wogs I met onsite, listening to Dean Martin and Frank. I believe I was the only bloke to have a herb garden, also with cherry tomatoes and sunflowers growing outside my room. With a bolt box filled with soil, wheels stolen from a welding screen that I screwed to the bottom.. I had a mobile garden... but still a dream...

Italy... I was on my way... but first I needed to learn the language... Sicily, being the Salmeri heritage, I headed to the town of my Grandfather... Milazzo, a small port town. This is where I started my Italian adventure. Out of my comfort zone... it was an amazing summer of eating, cooking, meeting new family, learning Italian and also for the first time GIRLS.... I mean after five years at CCGS, six years Navy and two years mines... it was about time... so I started to make up for lost time... and it was a good run! I arrived in Florence to start school but I needed a job... so I found one as a tour guide giving wine and food tours to tourists... A few mates here today can vouch for this (thanks for all the visits lads).

I figured as long as I studied hard and knew more than they did I would be fine... what a time, I was living the dream in a country I loved, learning to cook and a new culture, language (karaoke and Elvis every Friday night.. and also Tuesday... okay and Thursdays), finding who I really was, making friends from all over the world. If anyone has visited the city of Florence then you know what I mean.

I find education a funny thing... what makes a good student? I was never top of my class at school or Navy, not even close in fact I scraped through every time... because I had no passion... but here at culinary school, I found myself studying hard every night, homework was fun, top of my class each test and being awarded a scholarship from James Beard House in New York! I now loved what I was doing. After school, I was offered a role as the sous chef at the school's restaurant, so for the next three years, I worked my way to head chef and manager. I was teaching students and cooking my own menus. My favourite days were Sundays, taking my vintage Vespa, 1968 blue 50cc. I would go all day seven to 10 hours touring the Tuscan hills, clearing my mind, thinking of food and the menu for the following week. Summers spent cooking in my friend's restaurant on the beach in Sicily. Life was sweet... but I was in a bubble, a dream world, of Aperol spritz and pappadelle... I needed a new challenge after six years. Silly enough I thought life was too good so I figured London would be a great way to burst this bubble and bring me back to reality... and boy did it... But it was

here I was offered a job at The River Café.

The job that would change me the most, grounding me. I was back at the bottom, feeling I couldn't cook, I knew nothing, pushed around by English guys telling me how to cook Italian food... I had no choice but to keep quiet (anyone knows that is hard for me) and for the first time... I listened, I cooked and worked hard. Life in London was all about The River Café. In a short time I was moving up. A surreal experience cooking for celebrities every night and being inspired by owner Ruth Rogers and the great chefs I worked with, some of whom are now my best friends.

I particularly enjoyed Ruth asking me to cook private dinners on my days off at her home, Royal Avenue in Sloane Square, London... "Who is coming for dinner," I asked, "Oh just a few friends." A few friends, the likes of the US Ambassador, top fashion designers, Academy Award winners, famous architects, then at the end she would make me join the table and enjoy wine and listen to their stories, which was similar to the ones we chefs would tell, only ours had a few extra curse words and not mentioning dinner last week with the President of the USA.

I say to this day, I learnt about food in Italy but learnt to cook at The River Cafe, a restaurant built on passion, a philosophy of serving good Italian food, cooked simply, using the best local ingredients you can find and offering people an experience of good food with no tricks or gimmicks, allowing the ingredients to speak for themselves. I have a strong desire and drive to now bring this food and style to Australia. I believe we need to be educated, in slow food, sustainability, supporting local producers, seasonal produce, teaching our kids about food and to cook. I hope to be a part of the next generation of chefs and teachers (because every chef needs to teach) here back home.

Thank you to:

- St Hilda's chef Mark and his staff
- the wine producers
- Chris and Claire Webster, and Andrew Baird

- Tony Salom for the dining room
- All my CCGS mates here today - and all other CCGS old boys

Enjoy life - think positive - have a passion and follow it - live your dreams.

Paul Salmeri