



Guillaume won three chef hats, the highest award of the Good Food Guide. Only four other restaurants in the city currently share the same status.

# Guillaume at Bennelong.

## The icon within an icon.

By Pauline Auzou

Everyone knows the Sydney Opera House. It is possibly Australia's most celebrated landmark. Not everyone knows however that behind its futuristic walls is the exclusive restaurant Bennelong, just as highly prized in culinary circles. Parisian Guillaume Brahimi has become such an integral part of the restaurant's success that its name was changed to Guillaume at Bennelong.

Sydney's food bible, the Good Food Guide, judged that under Guillaume's direction Bennelong has hit new levels of gastronomical delight. "It more than lives up to its iconic status, presenting pure pleasure on a plate and highly skilled service, all under the breathtaking Utzon architecture that soars above." Many chefs would kill to win similar praise.

Not that Guillaume thinks his rapid rise to the top is particularly remarkable. "I am from a family of bon-vivants and I wasn't particularly good at school, so the path to become a chef made perfect sense," he says.

At 14, Guillaume started as an apprentice at the Parisian restaurant Aux Charpentiers followed by three years at La Tour d'Argent.

Having absorbed many of La Tour d'Argent's secrets, at 19, Guillaume joined Jamin restaurant and the kitchen of Joël Robuchon who was honoured as "cook of the century" by the prestigious Gault and Millau guide. Working under Robuchon was to be a life-changing experience for the teenager. "There's not a single day where I don't think about Joel's cuisine," he says. "His influence on me has been tremendous!"

Guillaume was already dreaming about Australia, the kingdom of his other great passion, Rugby Union. He arrived in Sydney 20 years ago and promptly fell in love with the country vowing never to leave. His impressive culinary experience in France didn't open any doors for him in Australia, though. "British chefs steal the thunder of the French," Guillaume says matter-of-factly. "Gordon Ramsay is the star chef here."

Determined to build up a reputation for his own work, Guillaume opened his first restaurant, Pond, in Kings Cross, at the relatively tender age of 25. He quickly won acclaimed reviews that established his restaurant as a highlight on the Sydney culinary landscape.

In 2001, Bennelong, the exclusive restaurant inside the Opera House, began the search for a new chef. The rigorous selection process lasted for two months as top chefs from all over the world were interviewed for the prestigious position. Guillaume, however, was unfazed by the fierce competition and with almost insolent confidence, insisted that if chosen he would have his first name added to the restaurant's title. "Was I surprised to be chosen? Yes and no. I was very confident in my proposal."

One might expect a touch of local bitterness after a foreigner took over at such an Australian institution. But Guillaume insists that he's never faced any such animosity. "I feel as much Australian as French," he says.

Once again, restaurant critics praised his work and in 2006, Guillaume won three chef's

hats, the highest award of the Good Food Guide. Only four other restaurants in the city currently share the same status. "Honestly, this is a bit of a poisonous gift!" Guillaume says. "The slightest mistake, even the most minor is not forgiven".

How then does he respond to criticism or the occasional lukewarm review? "There are 200 people every night," he says with a Gallic shrug. "It is completely normal to get one or two disappointed customers. But it doesn't touch me. The restaurant is packed every evening. Do you know any other business where there is less than one per cent dissatisfaction?"

Guillaume's culinary style is French with an Australian touch. Since the first days in his own restaurant, his famed signature dish is basil-infused tuna and this still opens the Bennelong degustation menu. "The quality of the tuna is absolutely exceptional," he says. "You can't find such quality in Europe."

Would Guillaume ever return to France and try to earn the same recognition in his homeland as he currently enjoys Down Under? Guillaume agrees that the competition would be far tougher in France as he would effectively have to start again from scratch. But one quick glance at the dazzling Sydney harbour and he shouts out: "I can't see why I would go back anyway. The life here is fantastic!"