



# curious george

## George Calombaris has a few things on his mind.

Like opening a restaurant in Kew, and one in Sydney, and another in Athens. And maybe a Greek deli, if the numbers stack up. He's thinking about his role as judge on *Celebrity MasterChef*, on air in October, followed by a new *MasterChef* series for the not-yet-famous. And there are meetings with Channel 10 sponsor Coles to develop supermarket meals: a marinade for boil-in-the-bag pork, something with West Australian truffles.

Then there's the odd night working the stoves in his Melbourne restaurants, the Press Club and Hellenic Republic. "I don't go in there and slice onions: that would be ridiculous," he says. "Some people think that to be an amazing chef you need to touch the chervil, slice the onion. Well, I don't do what I do to stand there and slice onions. But, at the same time, it's good for the guys to see me in there, to see that I'm still in touch with my food."

Also on the to-do list is a refurb of the Press Club – new kitchen, new uniforms, new entrance ("with a sexy girl and guy greeting people"), and a signature scent designed by swank Greek skincare specialist Korres. "People love those little elements," he says. "The biggest comment we get now is from girls who go to the toilet and love the moisturiser. You could put a dog turd on the plate and they'd still talk about the hand cream."

Aside from work, Calombaris is due a date night with his girlfriend, his weekly tennis lesson is coming up ("my forehand topspin is looking amazing, I'm whipping them in") and he's getting up early tomorrow to watch his Greek soccer team Panathinaikos on the telly. Whichever way you slice, dice and sauce it, Calombaris's plate is full. Still, he doesn't give himself permission to be tired. "It's my dad," he says. "He hates the word tired. He doesn't believe in it. He says you're here to live, you're going to be a long time dead, so just do it." So George Calombaris – 30-year-old Greek cook, Hellenic hero, Mulgrave man – is doing it.

He's still calibrating the success of *MasterChef*, the reality TV show that got Australia talking about croquembouche and cravats. Suddenly, Calombaris became recognisable everywhere – even the Vatican, where he was bailed up by Aussie tourists. His fame has driven him from the internet. "I've banned myself from blogs and forums," he says. "It was doing my head in." (Comments on the *MasterChef* forums roam from "I've got

There's a lot more to George Calombaris than *MasterChef*. Like his plan for "global domination". He speaks frankly with **Dani Valent**.

a crush on George, soooo cute!" to "mumblemouth!" to "He annoyed me when he was saying 'yeah' non-stop and shovelling food down his mouth".) He admits to a dummy spit when a journalist harped on about his knife-licking tendencies and he recoiled when a fan asked for a photograph with him and asked him to hold her breast. "It was funny but mental," he says. "Are you kidding me, this chubby little cook?"

But mostly the fall-out is fantastic. "I went to a primary school in Narre Warren and we had mystery boxes and the kids had to tell us what they'd cook," he says. "This is how the eight-year-olds are talking now: 'I'd take the brown onion, I'd finely slice it, I'd caramelise it off with a bit of olive oil, I'd put some eggs through it and make a little caramelised onion tart.' Another one says, 'I'd take the strawberries, hollow them out, take the jelly and infuse that with the mint, and fill these strawberries with jelly so when you put them in your mouth you get a texture explosion.' That is so cool, I was going to give him a job."

Calombaris loves the fact that butchers are sourcing pigs' heads, dads are baking scones and homewares shops are selling out of pasta machines. "To be part of that – wow." He'd also love it if there was a trickle-up effect into his restaurant. "Hopefully, when families come into my restaurant, they're not going to say, 'I'm only having an entree', 'I don't want my lamb pink', the usual bullshit."

**Calombaris prefers making stock to taking stock but he concedes** that the past five years have been huge. In 2004, he was 25 and a chef on the rise. He'd blitzed his apprenticeship at the Sofitel, distinguished himself in international cooking competitions, risen through the ranks at fine diner Fenix, and landed as chef de cuisine at Reserve, the Federation Square restaurant that fielded booking requests from as far away as New York. The 2004

*Age Good Food Guide* anointed Calombaris Young Chef of the Year for his famously audacious food: Reserve's geek gastronomy included dishes such as duck with coffee pannacotta, mussels with strawberry sauce and wasabi-stuffed chocolate truffle. Some of it even tasted good. Off duty, Calombaris married Anita, who he'd met on a skiing holiday. They posed for wedding photos in the restaurant and bought a dream home in Berwick.

From the outside, it all looked picture book. But behind the scenes, Calombaris was struggling. Reserve received a lot of critical attention, but things weren't great financially. Calombaris stuck with his ship until she sank in early 2005. "It was a real kick in the pants for me, a sore point in my life," he says. "I didn't own the restaurant but I still felt I had failed." Things with his wife weren't great either. "Anita is a beautiful girl, a good girl, but she wanted a man that was home at five o'clock," says Calombaris. "I don't think she ever knew who I was, and I started to not believe in who I was, I started pretending I was something else." Part of that meant distancing himself from his parents. "That was very wrong of me," he says. "My parents have been amazing supporters and I disowned them, didn't spend much time with them." Berwick wasn't him. "I never wanted to live out there," he says. "It was about making other people happy, I forgot about making myself happy."

As troubled as the relationship was, Anita was crucial to Calombaris's success: she hooked him up with the businessmen who bankroll him. Anita works at manufacturing company Apex Steel, where her boss is Joe Calleja. "Anita was always talking about her boyfriend, bringing in newspaper clippings about him," says Calleja. "When he won the young chef award, I took notice. I thought he must be better than just some cook." Calleja met Calombaris. "He had a great personality – I'd seen other young chefs on Foxtel and George had just as much charisma – and I thought, why don't we do a restaurant together? I'm a frustrated wog that likes to have something on the side and it just sort of happened." Calleja's partner on the purse strings, Tony Lachimea, came on board too. A lot of chefs would like to have something "just sort of happen" with a steel company that turns over \$200 million a year. "I'm lucky," admits Calombaris.

He was also approached by hospitality veteran George Sykiotis, who was developing the Press Club →



**George through the ages:** (1) Calombaris at Sofitel, where he did his apprenticeship; (2) at Fenix, where he worked for Gary Mehigan; (3) at Reserve in 2003 (4); as Young Chef of the Year for 2004 (pictured with Paul Wilson and Philippa Sibley-Cooke); (5) on *MasterChef* in 2009.

site on Flinders Street. "I chased him around," says Sykiotis. "I loved the idea of a Greek restaurant." The two Greek boys got together to cook up a potential menu. "If he was doing Reserve food, I wouldn't have been interested, it was a fad, but he said he wanted to cook from the heart, from the soul." Calombaris declared himself – and his home town – over the "fluffy food" he'd been playing with at Reserve; instead he came up with approachable but fun interpretations of Hellenic dishes: mastic lamb neck, baklava souffle, calamari carbonara. "It absolutely blew my mind apart," says Sykiotis. "I told him we were going to kill it."

The Press Club opened in October 2006 and hasn't had a quiet night since. But Calombaris had tough times after he broke up with Anita in early 2007. "Their split caused a shitload of worry for me," says Joe Calleja. "We'd just opened the business, she wasn't happy, they wanted to kill each other." But Calombaris didn't feel he had a choice.

"I suddenly woke up and realised it was wrong. It was a terrible time, the hardest thing I've ever gone through," he says. "It was like a bad mix of flavours. Sometimes a dish goes together and the chemistry's not right. That's what it was like: even though there was love, it wasn't synching." Anita still works for Apex. "She's moved on, she's been professional about it," says Calleja. "But we're not allowed to talk about him here, or put *MasterChef* on." (Anita chose not to be interviewed for this story.)

**The split was devastating for Calombaris but also a relief** as he bounced back into the bosom of family and eased back into himself. "My sister, my best mate, they all said to me, 'We've got George back.' My dad says, 'Get up, life goes on, we don't need to see tears.' My mum is out buying me sheets and towels." Business has powered on.

Last year, the Calombaris-Sykiotis-Calleja-Lachimea conglomerate opened Maha Bar and Grill (with Shane Delia) in the city and Hellenic Republic in Brunswick. Calombaris is also a consultant for the Belvedere Club, a luxury hotel restaurant on Mykonos, Greece. He's left the 'burbs for a one-bedroom flat in East Melbourne – "it's so me" – shared with his girlfriend of two years, marketing agency owner Natalie Tricarico. The couple plans to move to North Fitzroy next year. "She's beautiful, understanding, supportive," says Calombaris. "She's a career woman, doing her thing, and I respect that. She also respects me. Never has she said to me, 'Why aren't you home?', put that pressure on me."

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Tricarico went through a marriage and divorce in similar fashion to Calombaris and both think this similarity helped them forge a strong bond. "We understood each other, we understood what we wanted in the next phase, there was no bullshit," says Tricarico. "Neither of us regret what we did and, though we never dreamed we would be divorcees, you grow and mature. We did make commitments for life, and life is a very long time. Now, though, in my relationship with George, I see that life is life. We can see ourselves growing old together." She's watched as her boyfriend has moved from industry identity to celeb chef.

"His life has changed, but he really hasn't," she says. "He's an amazingly grounded person. He has all this stuff in his head but he still manages to shut all that off, be where he is and then, later, turn it all back on." Calombaris socialises with family and old friends, plays as much tennis as he can, and on rare days at home, cooks while Tricarico plays kitchenhand. "He does amazing Thai food," she says. "We go to Victoria Street on a Sunday morning, get all the lemongrass and chilli, and he'll cook up the kind of meal he doesn't get a chance to cook in his restaurants." Tricarico doesn't see her man doing much zoning out. "I can sit by a pool and read a book; he'll sit by the pool and write a new menu. After *MasterChef*, I told

him he needed to have a break but it's what he loves to do and that's what makes him so successful."

So what drives Calombaris? "I love thinking of concepts and I've always been into food," he says. That's backed up by his mother, Mary who recalls that he ate mud and worms in the garden and, aged three, stuffed a nut in his nose. The family lived in Mulgrave, near the school. "Every lunchtime, he would call out, 'Mum! Mum!' and I would look from the kitchen window and see him standing at the school fence with half a dozen mates," says Mary Calombaris. "He'd ask if I was baking any cakes and if I could bring them over."

Food and business entwined in high school, when Calombaris operated a shopping service for a few boys at his Catholic boys' school, Mazonod College. "We used to give him our lunch money and he'd be the first out of the classroom to buy our lunch from the canteen. The deal was that he got our change," says old friend Greig Davie. Calombaris was clear that he wanted to be a chef from an early age. "He was very driven, he never wavered," says Davie. His parents weren't exactly encouraging. "I hoped he didn't want to become a cook – the hours! – but I could sense he was going into that field," says Mary, who ran a supermarket with her husband, Jim, until he returned to his original career as mechanical engineer.

When George was 16, they even invited a restaurateur friend to come and discourage their youngest son. Calombaris listened to the horror stories about late nights and bad conditions, then asked for a weekend job. After a couple of difficult pot-washing shifts, Mary begged her son to rethink. "He comes with his fingers waterlogged and I said to him, →



**George gets real:** in 2003, Calombaris runs wild with the likes of "melon three ways" with feta foam and candied olives, at *Reserve*...



... In 2007, he tones down his experiments, instead turning to his upbringing, reinventing high-end Greek cuisine at the *Press Club*...



... then in 2008 he offers up even folksier dishes such as this souvlaki with chips at the more casual *Hellenic Republic*.



**Eat and drink**

**Longrain** 40-44 Little Bourke Street, city, phone 9671 3151. "Love those long shared tables and it's food I can't cook myself – the eggnet salad is one of my favourite dishes."  
**MoVida** 1 Hosier Lane, city, phone 9663 3038. "Frank Camorra is pure class."  
**Matteo's** 533 Brunswick Street, North Fitzroy, phone 9481 1177. "For a beautiful night out when you want to impress someone."  
**E lounge** 409 Victoria Street, Abbotsford, phone 9429 6060. "Who'd have thought? It's probably the best pizza."

**Coffee**

**European** 161 Spring Street, city, phone 96540811  
**7 Grams** 505 Church Street, Richmond, phone 9429 8505  
**Cumulus Inc** 45 Flinders Lane, city, phone 9650 1445  
**Seven Seeds** 114 Berkeley Street, Carlton, phone 9347 8664

**Shopping**

**Essential Ingredient** at Prahran Market, **Queen Victoria Market**, **Oakleigh** delis "for a Greek fix".

**Where he hangs out**

"At home in **Melbourne** in winter and in **Mykonos** in the summer. Psarou Beach in Mykonos is the sexiest beach in the world. It's like rocking up to an exclusive nightclub – there's even a doorman there who looks you up and down."

**Weekend getaway**

**Daylesford** "I love the drive up there and the town is all about good food. The energy's really calming there."

**Parks**

**Fitzroy Gardens** "I live across the road from them and it's like you're not living in the city."

**Favourite day off**

"Start with brekkie at European, onto a spot of shopping down Little Collins Street, then lunch with my family and then dinner with my friends and, of course, an afternoon nap."

'Go in an office, get a tie and a suit.' He said, 'Mum, I tell you one thing: everyone starts at the bottom of the ladder and I'm going to climb that ladder. I'll prove it to you.' A 16-year-old talking like an adult! You can't argue with him."

Calombaris attributes at least some of his determination to his father's two bouts with bowel cancer, when George was six and again when he was 16. "The second time was very emotional for me, a really tough time," he says. "It was a big point in my life and those bumps motivate you not to take life for granted." Even today, Calombaris thinks back on his dad's illness. "I reflect on walking into the Alfred Hospital with him to get his chemotherapy and I think, why would I whinge about scales on the salmon or a staff member calling in sick? It drives me to always think positive."

Calombaris finished school (famously scoring 17 out of 99.95 for his VCE), then started an apprenticeship at the Sofitel under Raymond Capaldi and Gary Mehigan, now also a *MasterChef* judge. "He was a very single-minded young lad," says Mehigan. "He always had his head down, he always said 'yes'. His gumption, his gusto, you can tell when someone's got it." Every night, Jim and Mary Calombaris drove into the city to pick up their son. "A lot of mums and dads would say to me, 'Little Johnny is really tired, I'm concerned he's working too hard,'" recalls Mehigan. "Jim and Mary had a different attitude. They said, 'If he's not working hard enough, give us a call.'"

**"The show isn't the be-all and end-all. *MasterChef* is a freckle in the big picture of my life."**

His protege's work rate and attitude have continued to impress Mehigan. "The failure of Reserve could have been crushing to another person but he thought about what's important to him and kept going." Working with his former employee on *MasterChef* was pleasing. "He did a dish on the show, sweetbreads with parmesan crumble, a progression of the kind of dish we did at Fenix five years ago," says Mehigan. "Well, that's fine. He can do all that fancy stuff. But I'm more impressed when George puts lamb shanks with yoghurt and honey and thyme and bungs it in the oven. He's done all the training to complicate everything and there he is doing simple food beautifully. That strikes me more than anything."

**Hundreds of chefs were invited to audition for**

*MasterChef*. Calombaris was no television newbie, having been a regular on daytime cooking show *Ready Steady Cook* but he always hankered for a bit of prime-time action. Even so, he wasn't like some other chefs, quitting their jobs to rest premature hopes on *MasterChef*. "I had my restaurants, life was good, I wasn't nervous or worried," he says. "I just thought it would be cool, and I think that's what got me the gig, I was just George being George." He didn't suspect that the show was going to capture Australia in the way it did (a record-breaking 4.11 million viewers tuned in to watch the final on July 19). "They're telling us we've created history. I was feeling a bit naive, a bit cheffy, but definitely proud."

Calombaris says he didn't get emotionally attached to the contestants – "they're gonna go, I'm gonna go, I was careful" – but he couldn't help being swept up by the human drama. When the judges booted Justine off, "I look at Gary and he's tearing up, then I look at Matt and he starts getting teary, well, I could feel myself tearing up too." Nothing beat the final for feeling, though. "When I saw (winner) Julie's face when her family rocked up, to see her love for her family, that was amazing," he says. Calombaris has kept in touch with some contestants. "Justine, Julie, Andre, they can call me when

they need a hand," he says. He employed Aaron at Hellenic Republic until recently. "He made Greek salad for three months but he couldn't stick it out. I think his aspirations are a bit past his capabilities. I think you need to boil an egg before you fry it."

The *MasterChef* juggernaut was a boost for Calombaris's confidence. "I'm starting to speak better, being around Gary and Matt, the English scholars," he says, tongue not quite in cheek. But he's glad the show isn't the be-all and end-all. "After *MasterChef*, I didn't want to do radio, I didn't want to go on *Rove*, I wanted to go back to my restaurants for a couple of months. *MasterChef* is a freckle in the big picture of my life." His favourite project is still delivering diners restaurants they love. "I want world domination," he says, with a steely glint.

Joe Calleja, the 50-something entrepreneur, is a pillar. "Joe is like a big dad for me," says Calombaris. "He's got so much experience." That he's a hospitality outsider is an advantage. "He thinks our industry is bullshit, very amateur; we take a lot from his corporate mentality."

So, unusually for the restaurant world, his staff undertake performance reviews and staff meetings ensure the workforce is informed about future plans. So far, the restaurant group is growing like a beanstalk, from 26 to 130 staff in three years. George Sykiotis is important too. "He isn't emotional like I am," says Calombaris. "I'll get excited about a plate or a knife or a Greek deli. He goes away and does the numbers. If it doesn't stack up, it's not going to happen."

Making money isn't, apparently, the main motivation. "I was approached by one of the largest promoters of rave parties throughout the world: they wanted me to do a menu for VIP guests. No way am I going to be known as the druggie chef, I don't care how big the dollar signs are. I'm in this to make money but not pull my pants down."

The Press Club is Calombaris's baby but Hellenic Republic is the restaurant he hopes to take to the world. "It's a beautiful concept, I call it people's food," says Calombaris of his rollicking taverna. "I can roll out Hellenic Republic's white tarama anywhere in the world but I can't replicate a Press Club dish like olive oil cous cous cooked in liquid nitrogen." Hellenic Republic is all about high-volume consistency, feeding perfectly grilled fish to 300 people a night, and Calombaris gives his head chef Travis McAuley credit for codifying every dish in a manual. "You could put a plumber in Hellenic, put a chef's jacket on him and show him the book. 'Go ahead, you make it.' It's all structures."

Calombaris sees himself as director of a company; he's not rostered on to cook in his restaurants. Even so, he's present when he's in town, even if that means sitting with his back to the wall, keeping an eye on things. "I work on top of my business, not in my business. I might not be cooking, but if I'm eating in my restaurant, I might call up the next day and say to the guys, 'The tarama was perfect, the chips were beautiful but I don't like the waiters having their shirts untucked and I went into the toilets at 9pm and there was paper on the floor.'"

Over conversation at the Press Club, while liveried waitresses make tiny adjustments to tables set for lunch, he talks about a recent brainwave at a seafood restaurant on Mykonos. "We sat right on the water, at a table amongst all these pebbles on the ground. I took my thongs off and rubbed my feet on the ground. I felt so relaxed, so comfortable. I sneaked my notebook out and wrote 'ROCKS.'" The resulting Press Club dish – it's on the current menu – has pebbles in a wooden dish with raw fish and marinades alongside. "The idea is that you play with the rocks, while you dip the fish into these little sauces. For me, this is awesome, I really get off on it," he says, intense, beaming, shining in the moment. "That's what it's all about." (m)