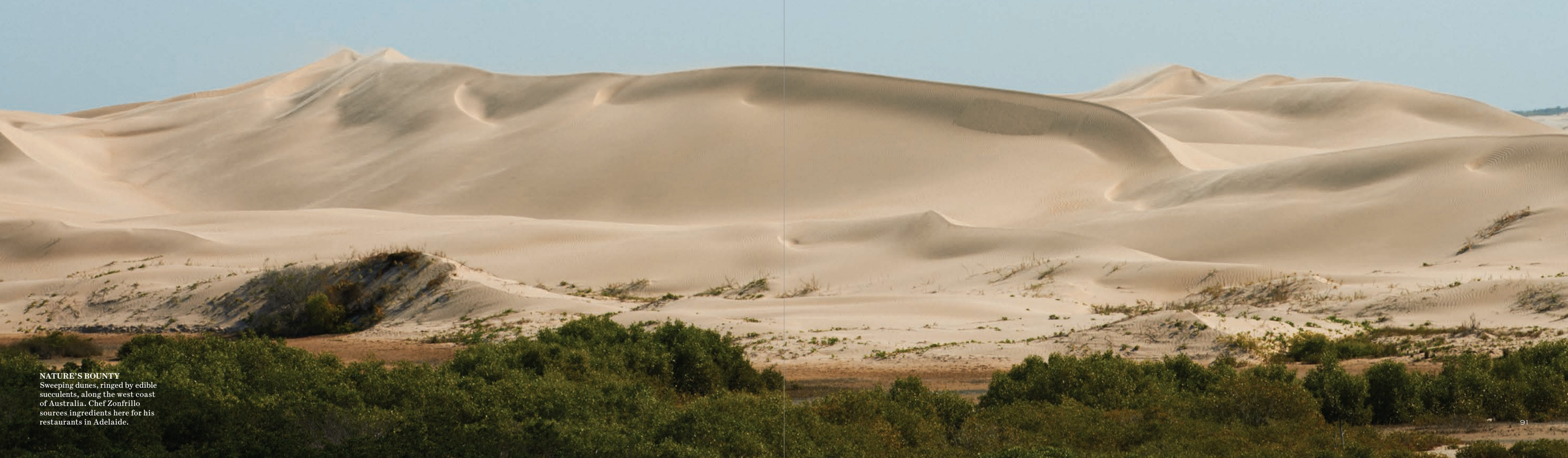
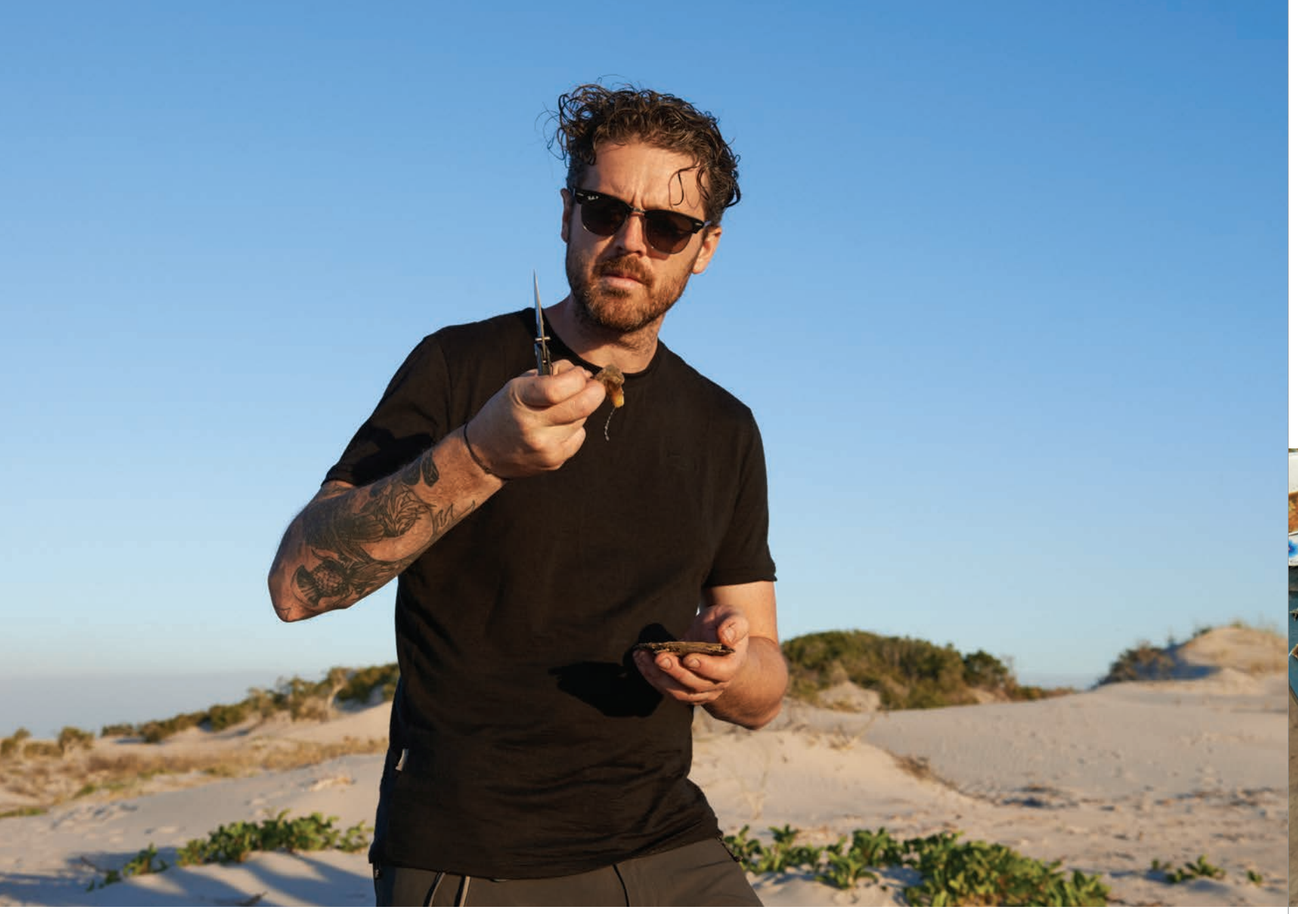
How to Eat AUSTRALIAN

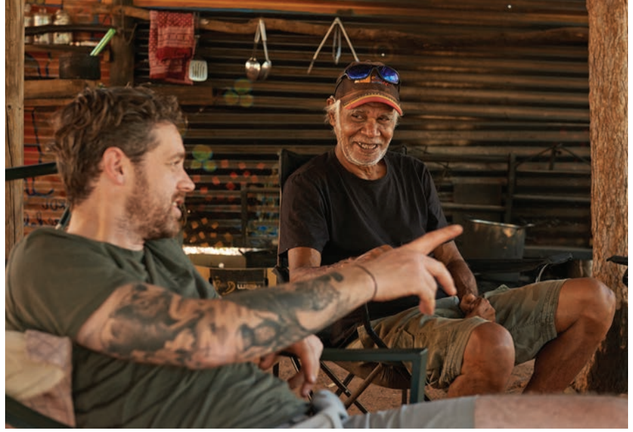
The vast country, its landscape home to thousands of wild edible ingredients, has no clear native cuisine. Chef Jock Zonfrillo wants to change all that.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEREK HENDERSON



NATURE'S BOUNTY
Sweeping dunes, ringed by edible succulents, along the west coast of Australia. Chef Zonfrillo sources ingredients here for his restaurants in Adelaide.





OCEAN OASIS
Clockwise from far left: Jock Zonfrillo shucks a clam pulled straight from the reef; Zonfrillo and Nyul Nyul elder Bruno Dann, who helps him source ingredients, chat before dinner; crabs hooked from muddy mangrove roots are prepped for dinner.

LATE ON A HOT, dry spring afternoon, two men and a dog (a three-quarters dingo) cut across a barren stretch of the coastal outback. The younger man is a chef, 38-year-old Jock Zonfrillo, a rangy Scotsman who for the past 15 years has made Australia his home. His friend Bruno Dann—a 63-year-old Nyul Nyul elder who supplies Zonfrillo with ingredients native to this region—leads the way across a slow-flowing stream. "That's *karkalla*," says the chef, scrambling up a bank toward a thicket of edible succulents. "We use that on our lamb dish." He snips a plump green bud and pops it into his mouth. "A bit salty but delicious," he says. "You can get $26 a kilo for that."

The chef won't be picking a bushel to bring back to his two restaurants. His bar-food spot, Street, and its fine-dining sibling, Orana, are both in Adelaide, almost 2,000 miles away. As we march toward the coast, dense gray soil gives way to sugar-fine sand rising in ripples. The landscape changes fast in the Kimberley, an immense territory stretching from the Indian Ocean into the Tanami Desert. "Thousands of people used to live here," says Dann, surveying his ancestral land from the wind-swept crest of a dune.

Up ahead, a carpet of sharp seashells makes walking a challenge. We've entered an old Nyul Nyul midden—an ancient feasting place—overflowing with the discarded husks of crustaceans. Around a corner the low tide reveals a moonscape of black craggy rocks; farther out, near a reef, oysters, sea snails and giant clams are all easy pickings. Few have ever made a meal from that natural raw bar, apart from the quickly vanishing Nyul Nyul people—just a few hundred remain in the area—who left those drained shells behind.

For Zonfrillo, only remote spots like this allow a perspective on what Australian cuisine ought to look like. From his home base in Adelaide, he's been leading a one-man crusade to move beyond the muddle of post-colonial influences that typically passes for Australian cooking. "How is it possible," he says, "that a country with such regional diversity and 40,000 years of culture doesn't have a real cuisine of its own?" Sometimes it takes an outsider to shake the status quo, someone unburdened by historical baggage, in this case a legacy of policies and attitudes that pushed Aborigines to the margins of Australian society. "The country has this dark, troubled past," he says. "Nobody wants to talk about it, and that comes across in the food."

Zonfrillo has spent years exploring parts of the country that homegrown chefs have mostly ignored, traveling to indigenous communities in search of ancient wisdom, eventually translating what he learned to a contemporary restaurant setting using skills he acquired in Michelin-starred kitchens in Great Britain. His restaurants use only ingredients grown, raised or produced on the continent, many of them entirely foreign to the average urban Australian. "There are 20,000 edible native things in this country," he says. "You could write six encyclopedias on the subject."

Like his friend René Redzepi of Noma in Denmark—where he spent a few months cooking in 2012—Zonfrillo often serves food that's been picked wild near his restaurants. All the cooks at Orana regularly rotate through foraging duty, filling a refrigerated van with porcini, nettles and pea shoots gathered in the Adelaide Hills, with seaweed plucked from a beach south of the city or with chocolate lilies (edible flowers that smell like chocolate) clipped from their own backyards. Still, he's no locavore zealot—he's championing an entire continent, and sourcing ingredients from across this vast country.

The menu at Street—a gateway venue he hopes to expand to Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane—reads like classic Down Under bar food, but the sweet-sticky pork ribs have been soaked in a sauce made from local riberries and *quandongs*, the spicy grilled chicken gets its kick from a wild, foraged bloodroot, and the burger comes topped with bush-tomato relish instead of ketchup. "Street pushes native ingredients on people like a drug dealer," says the chef, "without telling them what's in there."

At Orana, his 30-seat fine-dining showcase hidden upstairs, you get much more information about what's on your plate. The 24 or so seasonal courses and snacks might include buffalo-milk curd seasoned with dehydrated green ants, or slices of saltwater crocodile slow-cooked and served on a swamp-green puddle of fermented mangrove-seed sauce. Both dishes channel tropical Arnhem Land in the far Northern Territory, a "ferocious" part of the country where Zonfrillo recently spent time hunting and fishing. The adventure was captured on film for a new series on Discovery Networks International. A fire-roasted kangaroo preparation has its roots in the APY Lands, an isolated desert community in the south that he's struggled to infiltrate. "A lot of communities look at what I do and think I'm going to exploit them," he says.

Zonfrillo fits his renegade role like an outlaw biker—amply tattooed and salty tongued—though he cleans up well on TV. He's a reluctant heartthrob whose floppy curls and disarming smile brought in a flood of embarrassing fan mail, from as far away as India, after a stint as a guest chef last year on *MasterChef Australia*.

Though he's certainly at ease on camera, he's most comfortable out of the limelight and far off the grid, as he is now, touring the Kimberley with Bruno Dann. Returning to Dann's camp from their coast walk laden with seafood, the chef starts prepping dinner under a big wooden shelter, across from a picnic table and a fire pit shooting up brittle-wood flames. "I didn't know we had these in Australia," he says, prying open a giant clam, a flashlight strapped to his forehead illuminating his bush-kitchen work space. He transforms half the meat into an impromptu ceviche, then grills up the rest, yakitori-style, with his long surgical chef's tongs.

Dann and his partner in life and business, a transplant from Sydney named Marion Manson, harvest an orchard here that supplies wild lemongrass, narcoleptic *jilungin* tea and *gubinge* (also known as *kakadu* plum) to Zonfrillo. The tiny tart green plums, said to be among the most vitamin-C-rich fruits on earth, have become their big cash crop, distributed Australia-wide by a health-food wholesaler that sells a powdered form.

The couple first met Zonfrillo seven years ago when he came rumbling up their bumpy dirt road, his Mitsubishi Outlander falling apart after a mostly unpaved 38-hour drive from Adelaide, two NoDoz-and-Red-Bull-fueled 19-hour shifts across the desert. "Occasionally you've just got to go and do it," he says, "have a little faith."

After a warm reception from Manson and Dann, a friendship quickly developed. With no restaurant kitchen to run at the time, Zonfrillo decided to stay for a while, to spend a few weeks sleeping—then as now—beneath a mosquito-dome under the stars, subsisting on fish snared with hand lines and tidal nets, washing up outdoors in a bath filled from an underground borehole. "You can quite easily live off the land right here," he says, dispatching a bucket of mud crabs, one after another, with a chef's knife through the brain. These are soon simmering in coconut milk with native bloodroot, lemongrass, ginger, bush tomatoes and desert lime—a delicious sweet-spicy improv riffing on Singapore-style chile crabs.

His restaurant dishes are rarely so casually conjured, often taking months—sometimes years—in their evolution from Aboriginal lore to the tasting menu. Many native food traditions have already been lost to modernity, to the frozen meat pies and factory-made bread that fill general stores in government-built towns like nearby Beagle Bay, where Dann and his siblings were raised in Christian mission dorms—part of Australia's "stolen generation" of indigenous children, ripped from their families and cultures and forbidden to speak their own language.

Zonfrillo is developing a foundation that he hopes will help the disenfranchised communities he works with by identifying ingredients with harvest—i.e., economic—potential. "We'll help them realize what they have, without screwing with it," he says. He's meticulous about chasing food stories and memories down to their roots, cross-referencing old wives' tales with historic documents and testing an ingredient's toxicity at a university lab before using it in his own kitchen.

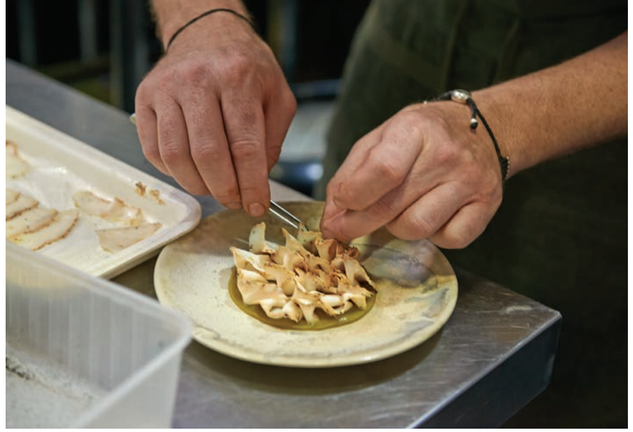
For a long time, Zonfrillo, the son of an Italian barber and a Scots hairdresser from Glasgow, was

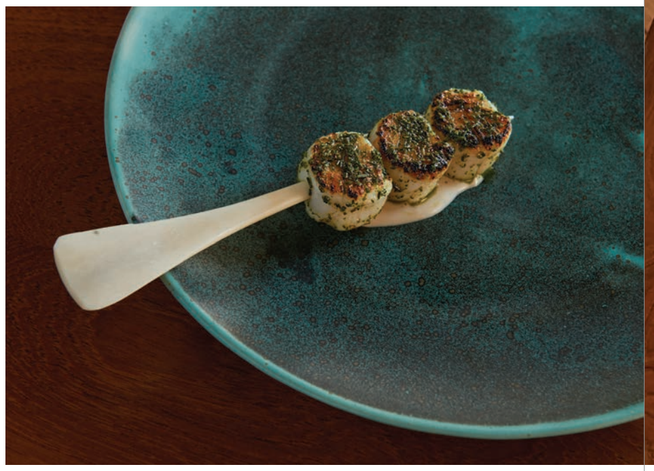
just as consumed by the drive to get high. The ink running up his right arm tells a bit of that story—and of the personal and professional passions that ultimately kept him in line. A tattoo of the Scottish coat of arms features a flag with the names of his daughters—Sofia, 9, and Ava, 14—each from a different ex-wife. The raven represents freedom, he says, the skull and crossbones his pirate mentality. There's an Aboriginal snake in there, too, along with a pig, a longhorn skull and a thistle.

Zonfrillo discovered his professional calling while he was still young. At 13 he landed a dishwashing job at a fancy Scottish-French restaurant in Glasgow, in order to save up enough to buy a spiffy new bike. Though barely a teenager, a few weeks in he wound up filling in for a cook who called in sick. "That night I just got the bug," he says. "I decided, Hell, I want to be a chef."

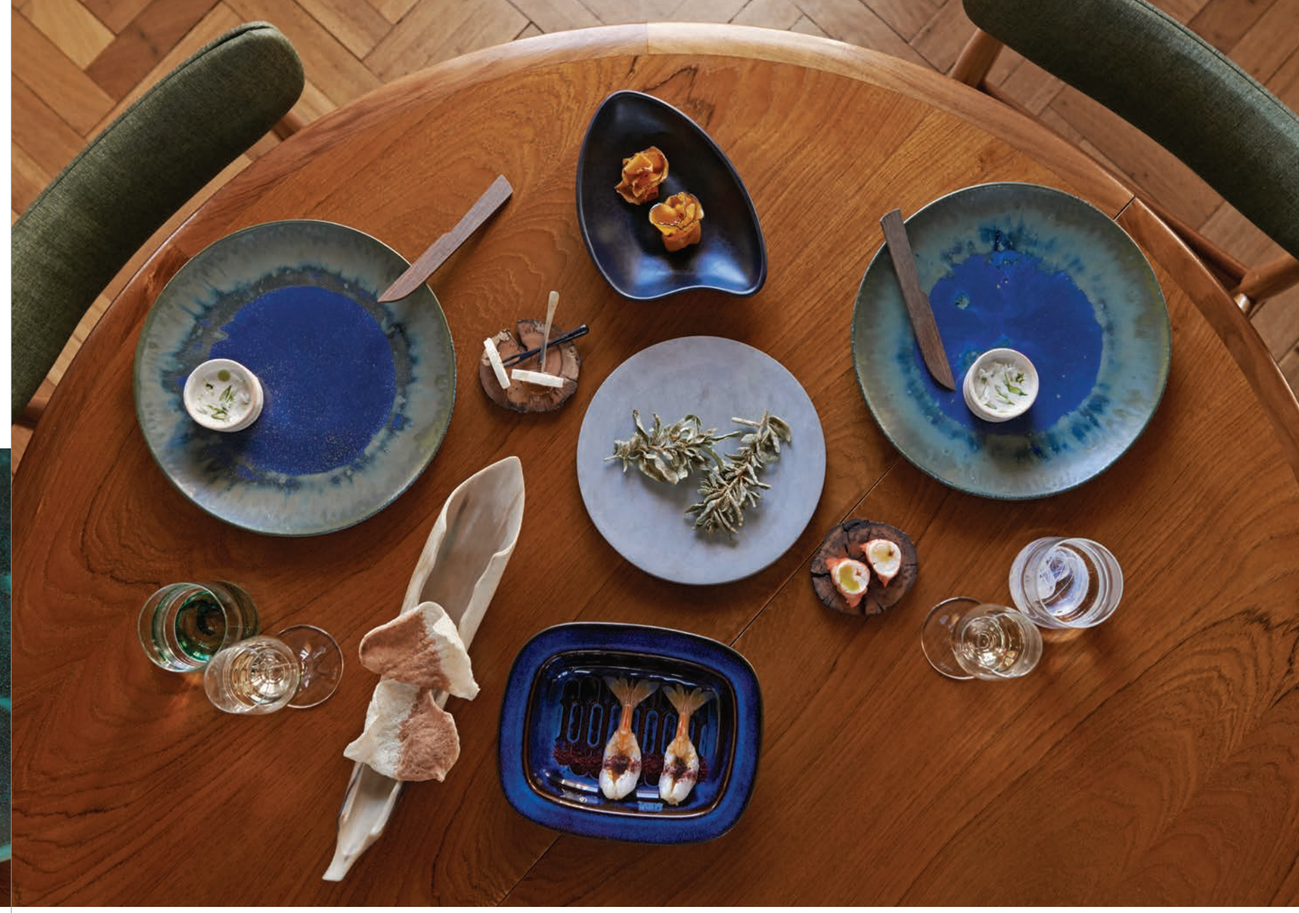
By 15 he'd dropped out of school and signed on for a two-year kitchen apprenticeship at the Turnberry Hotel. Along with classic French cooking techniques, he learned to forage for mushrooms and hunt game in the woods surrounding the property's golf course. He also began dabbling in heroin. "Growing up in Glasgow, drugs were just part of life," he says. "It was an edgy place. Luckily I found cooking, too—for a lot of my friends there was nothing more compelling in their life than smack."

Following Turnberry, the young chef quickly rose through a number of top restaurants in the British countryside. After being fired from one for unleashing a profanity-laced tirade audible to the entire dining room, he turned up dead-broke in London begging Marco Pierre White—then the consummate rock-star chef—for a job at his Michelin-starred flagship. He was hired on the spot. For a while he slept on the closet floor at the restaurant—until a sommelier discovered him there. White eventually became a father figure, supportive even through Zonfrillo's darkest drug-addled moments. "There were times when I was f—ing useless," he says, "but I always got up and always went to work—that's what kept me alive, and what eventually led me to stop using drugs."





AMUSE-BOUCHE Clockwise from top: At Orana, Zonfrillo uses tweezers to plate petals of crocodile meat; snack courses include pumpkin petals brushed in aged beef fat, medallions of marron (a local crustacean), Spencer Gulf prawns, puffed beef tendon and fried saltbush; Kangaroo Island scallops with Geraldton wax, a peppery herb that grows wild across South and West Australia.



Zonfrillo finally made a clean break in 2000—he says he hasn't touched heroin since—when he moved to Sydney with his wife at the time, a homesick Australian who soon became pregnant. "A huge change in life can often break the cycle," says the chef. He started working at one of the city's top restaurants at the time, Forty One, with skyscraper views and the sort of outward-looking pan-Asian cuisine that had become a hallmark of "modern Australian" cooking. "I naively thought there'd be loads of kangaroos hopping around, loads of Aboriginal people and some kind of cuisine that involved that," he says. When he tried introducing a few native ingredients to the restaurant's menu, none of the patrons seemed interested. "Everybody was supposedly celebrating the Australian way of life," he says, "but they didn't want to know about food that originated here." His boss, Swiss chef Dietmar Sawyere, let Zonfrillo know he should tone it down.

Back in the 1980s, Australians had embraced their pre-colonial terroir for a while—beginning with survivalist aspects promoted on television by retired army major Les Hiddins (the so-called Bush Tucker Man)—but the native-foods boom that brought a handful of ingredients to the fore (finger limes, lemon myrtle) was never more than a passing fad. By the time Zonfrillo reached Australia, "bush tucker" cooking had become a sandals-with-socks hippie cliché. "No attempt had been made to look at where these things came from, their ties to the community and traditional uses," he says. "My process was to understand what went wrong first, and then reverse-engineer it."

Zonfrillo started his own investigation with Aboriginal communities in the Blue Mountains, a few hours outside Sydney, and eventually learned about their six-season calendar and their deep respect for the land. Despite his enthusiasm, he knew it would be a challenge to bring the public along. By 2002, he had become so disillusioned with the restaurant scene he quit cooking entirely and started his own company importing professional kitchen equipment. Six years later, divorced and remarried, he sold off the business and moved sight unseen to Adelaide, the gateway to Australian wine country, where his new wife had family.

By then, having been obsessed with indigenous foods for nearly a decade, he'd developed a roster of dozens of recipes. Word of his culinary experimentation found its way to executives at the large vintner Penfolds, who'd been looking for someone to reboot their restaurant at Magill Estate, a vineyard just outside Adelaide. They hoped to create a dining destination as identifiable with Australian heritage as their cult wine, Grange. "They had the checkbook, the reputation," Zonfrillo says. "It seemed right at the time."

He introduced a new menu in the fall of 2010. A year later, the *Advertiser* newspaper in Adelaide named Magill Estate its restaurant of the year. Then the place shuttered for a complete overhaul—a $3 million investment—including a tricked-out new kitchen of the chef's own design. While construction proceeded, Zonfrillo took advantage of the time off to travel, with the wine producer partly footing the bill. He flew to Brazil to meet up with chef Alex Atala, who through his São Paulo restaurant D.O.M. and foundation had done for the Amazon's tribal larder what Zonfrillo hoped to do for Australia's. "Jock and I tried to inspire each other," says Atala, "working with indigenous communities and ingredients—he on his side of the world and me on mine." The two men went deep into the jungle with the Baniwa people and together made lunch for their hosts. "I was impressed by the way Jock was able to play with ingredients he'd never seen before and get great results," says Atala.

Later, Zonfrillo took a distressing call from back home. A management change at Penfolds had brought with it a change of heart about the restaurant and where it was heading. "They didn't like the fact that the food was getting more attention than the wine," he says. "They were uncomfortable with the Aboriginal thing, too." Rather than serve more accessible fare—say, the Wagyu beef with asparagus you'll find at the restaurant these days—Zonfrillo decided to walk away. ("Jock is incredibly talented," says a spokesperson for Penfolds, "and we are pleased to see him enjoy success as he follows his creative ambition.")

Street and Orana opened 10 months later, in the fall of 2013, on money from a bank loan, with almost the entire kitchen staff at Magill Estate following the magnetic chef across town. While he was launching the two places, Zonfrillo juggled a punishing travel schedule, shooting his own Discovery show, *Nomad Chef* (it began airing late last year in the U.K., Australia and Asia). The series, which sets his passion for indigenous foods in a global context, has him eating bat in Vanuatu, piranha in the Peruvian Amazon, raw cow stomach in the Ethiopian highlands and puffin hooked from cliff tops in the Faroe Islands. "I got sick just about everywhere we went," he says, watching clips on a laptop one morning at Dann's camp in the Kimberley. "You self-medicate, you keep filming; you have to keep going."

On a bush walk that evening, Dann leads the chef through his wild harvest orchard, pointing out plants good for healing, plants good for eating and plants to avoid. We pass a "boomerang tree," its wood ideal for carving, and a "tattoo tree," the acid-sap on its branches said to leave irreversible scars. "Will burn you for life," warns Dann. "I want to f—ing do it," says Zonfrillo, touching a few drops to his arm and leaving a small permanent mark.

They pause to yank at a yam buried deep in the ground. Dann pours on water to loosen the soil. "I'll give it a crack, mate," says Zonfrillo, struggling for a while before giving up. Wild donkeys and a rogue bull named Lonesome hide among the gubinge trees, as wildfires in the distance send up plumes of black smoke.

The woods open up, revealing a shallow, marshy lake. Dann pulls a mysterious tuber from under the water, a lily bulb of some sort. Zonfrillo will experiment with it later back at camp. "This will either turn out to be a really good idea or a really bad one," he says. The marsh spuds end up bland and starchy, after a slow cook in hot coals. "Bush ingredients are like that," he says. "You have to work with them, go through trial and error before you get something good." •