



# BRETT GRAHAM

PHOTOGRAPHS *by* JONATHAN GLYNN-SMITH

## The Ledbury: Nice Guy Finishes First

By Lydia Itoi

**W**hoever heard of a nice guy finishing first? The top-ranked restaurant in the UK has no development lab, not even a cookbook or PR agency. Chef-proprietor Brett Graham of The Ledbury in London's Notting Hill is a nice Aussie lad running what may be the world's best neighborhood restaurant.

Forget wizardry. Never mind celebrity. For a chef, the most important traits are resilience and a passion for making people happy, one meal at a time. While other chefs talk about their ideology or creative process, for Graham, it is a toss-up where he places more importance, on his customers or on his team. In return, his customers and team stand with him through good and bad times. When a rioting mob of looters smashed into The Ledbury's dining room in August 2011 to rob the clientele (which happened to include the editor of this magazine and her daughter), they met determined resistance from Graham's loyal, broom-stick-wielding kitchen brigade. The rioters can only count themselves lucky

that Graham himself happened to be away that night for a family event.

Perhaps it's true that adversity breeds success. The looting attack was merely another gut-plunger in what has been a rollercoaster couple of years. Earlier in 2011, The Ledbury catapulted to 34th on the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurant list, the highest new entry for the year. This good news reached Graham in hospital, where he was fighting a life-threatening brain infection. In 2010, The Ledbury won its second Michelin star amid an economic downturn. Graham was the first Australian chef to win two stars. This achievement was underscored when Graham's Harwood Arms gastropub also won a Michelin star.

The morning after the riot attack, Brett Graham himself was sweeping up the broken glass from the entrance and handling inquiries from the police, the media, and passersby. The restaurant closed for only one service before reopening for business as usual—which in the case of The Ledbury, means 60

covers twice a day, 7 days a week. It's hard to imagine what kind of blow would knock him from his stride.

Since the riots, however, it has been mostly champagne and roses for Graham and his Ledbury team, led by his indispensable sous chef, Gregory Austin. In 2012, they again won the National Restaurant Awards, making them the UK's top restaurant for the third year running and the first to pull off such a hat trick. They also rocketed up 20 places to number 14 on the 50 Best Restaurant list, making them the highest climber for 2012. On the personal front, Graham is healthy and newly married to his long-time partner Natalie. "I'm not even thinking of doing any more projects," he says. "The Ledbury is now 8 years old. This is the year we really make a push to get it all right." Although there is an environmentally conscious kitchen refit in the works, for Graham "get it right" means an intense focus on team building and customer satisfaction.

### *The Secret is in the Sauce*

So what's the Ledbury's secret? Graham reels off a quaintly hackneyed philosophy: quality, seasonal ingredients, good value (the *prix fixe* lunch menu is probably the best deal in town, both economically and gastronomically), great service, no distracting TV or book deals or restaurant empire. Surely it can't be anything so obvious.

That goes to show that the obvious isn't so easy.

Consider, for example, the Heritage Tomato Salad, a deceptively simple dish whose impact depends not on culinary wizardry but on good ingredients well prepared. Graham presents five or six old-fashioned, naturally pollinated tomatoes at the height of their flavor, including a green but fully ripe "Green Zebra" or his favorite, a mottled reddish-black "Noir de Crimée." The dish is a master class in tomatoes, but the specific varieties aren't listed on the menu because Graham thinks some names might be off-putting. "Pigeon Heart" might confuse people about what's in the dish. "Pineapple Ribbed" sounds like a condom."

The pleasure is in the tomatoes' remarkable variation of colors and flavors but the secret is the dressing – an elixir of tomato extracted from the trimmings, with bonito pearls packing an unexpected umami punch. No, these are not chemical-laced spherifications but jellied bonito broth dropped in frozen oil to form pearls. So simple, with a grace note of modern technique that stops well short of gimmicky. Sending a ray of summer sun into London's grey streets isn't easy, but it's no harder than making a great tomato salad.

### *A Culinary Weed*

Despite all he has been through lately, Graham still claims that opening the Ledbury in 2005, with the backing of partners Phil Howard and Nigel Platts-Martin, was the hardest thing he's ever done. "I was 26 and had never been a head chef before. It was incredibly tough." He had come to London from Sydney in 2000 with a free plane ticket for winning the Josephine Pignolet scholarship prize and



# Salad of Heirloom Tomatoes

## with Goats' Curd Cigars, Dried Olives and Green Tomato Juice

**Selection of Heirloom Tomatoes** *Pinch of Maldon salt, 10 g minced shallots, 5 g chopped chives*

Pineapple Ribbed  
Rose de Berne  
Pigeon Heart  
Noir de Crimée  
Datterino

Carefully and artfully slice a few pieces of each type of tomato to order. Do not prep ahead. Cut wedges, cylinders, cross slices.

**Green Tomato Juice**  
*500 ml tomato consommé (made from green tomatoes), 45 g olive oil, 15 g chives, 13 g Gelespesse (xantham gum), Salt and pepper to taste*

Blend all ingredients together in blender at the highest speed until smooth, then strain. Adjust seasoning.

**Tomato Pearls**  
*1 L tomato juice, 10 g bonito flakes, 12 g agar agar*

**Tomato Dressing**  
*100 g Tomato Pearls, 45 g extra virgin olive oil, 100 g Balsamic vinegar,*

Preparare una vinaigrette alla quale si aggiungerà il resto degli ingredienti.

**Dried Black Olives**  
*50 g pitted black olives*

Dehydrate olives, crush into coarse powder.

**Goat's Curd Cigars**  
*2 sheets filo pastry, Olive oil, Sea salt, 200 g soft goats' curd, Dried olive powder*

Brush the filo pastry with olive oil and wrap around metal tube molds and bake until golden. Pipe in curd the dip each end in dried olive powder.

**Garnishes**  
*Nasturtium Leaves, Basil leaves, Selection of seasonal edible flowers, Crushed bread croutons  
Olive oil*

### **To plate**

*Slice and arrange the selection of tomatoes on the plate and season with salt. Place some balsamic on the tomatoes and drizzle on the dressing. Arrange the piped goats' curd cigars on the plate then arrange the crushed croutons, herbs, nasturtium leaves and flowers on the tomatoes. Finish with the green tomato juice and some extra dried olive powder.*

little in his pocket besides a recommendation to do a stage at London's The Square restaurant. Yet a year after opening the Ledbury, he had his first Michelin star.

Tracing Graham's culinary roots is tricky since he doesn't seem to have any. He readily admits that he grew up eating crap food, fresh from the freezer, in a gritty industrial town with no culture of fine dining. His first job was making garlic bread at a fish joint named Scratchley's on the Wharf. He had never heard of Michelin, and what he knew about haute cuisine came from rubbing shoulders with cooks who had trained in good restaurants abroad.

Naturally easygoing Brett Graham did need some toughening up at first. His mentor, Ian Tomlin of Sydney's legendary Banc, apparently had his doubts about the long-haired high school dropout with no knowledge of formal culinary terms or respect for kitchen hierarchy. Graham even misunderstood "Oui, Chef" as "We, chef." Young Graham bore the brunt of Tomlin's old-school hard kitchen discipline, even having his hair shorn off if it ever dared show itself from under the toque. The turning point came one day when Graham had had enough and declared he was going home to Newcastle. "Ian sat me down and said I could either go live in a windmill back in Newcastle or get back in the kitchen." Unbeknownst to Graham, Tomlin then called his parents and asked them to convince him to return. Graham laughs, "I got back to the kitchen and got my head down."

But *tabula rasa* has its advantages. Graham's cooking shows a healthy balance of eclecticism and individual freedom within a rigorously edible, approachable framework. Graham prefers to stay in his kitchen rather than attend international culinary conferences or chefs' junkets, so he relies on his Antipodean genius for sponging up gastronomic references from all corners of the globe and reworking it into his own style.

Justina, a young Polish wine waiter, was startled to find *kromeski*, a coarse working-class dish she wouldn't touch back home, on the menu of a refined London

# Celeriac Baked in Ash

## with Wild Boar Kromeski, Hazelnuts and Grated Egg



### Salt Crust

850 g salt, 3 kg T55 Flour, 1200 ml water, 20 turns of pepper, 60 g chopped herbs – thyme, rosemary – blended in the robot coupe with some of the flour

Place all the salt crust ingredients in a Hobart mixer on paddle speed 2 for 5 minutes. Check consistency. It is important that is not too wet. Roll tightly in plastic film. Chill until firm.

### For Celeriac

4 celeriac roots, 2 tbs of ash made from burning hay, Salt crust

Cut the celeriac into quarters and then peel, discarding the skin. Wrap in salt crust, bake for 35 min at 160° and then let cool.

### Grated Egg

2 freshly laid free range eggs

Boil eggs for 7 minutes, chill and peel. Pass through coarse sieve.

### Truffle Cream

5 egg yolks, 75 ml sherry vinegar, 250 ml water, 25 ml truffle oil, 900 ml grapeseed oil, 1 large truffle, chopped, Salt

In the Thermomix blend the yolks, add the sherry vinegar and 200 ml water, reserving 50 ml. Slowly add the oils and salt to create emulsion. Use the remaining water to adjust consistency if necessary. Blend in the chopped truffle, adjust seasoning, then refrigerate.

### To plate

Warm the celeriac in oven for about 7 minutes, then remove from salt crust. Slice in half. Place the celeriac pieces and kromeski on the plate. Garnish with the truffle cream, roasted hazelnuts, a selection of sorrels. Sprinkle on sieved egg, then drizzle with vinaigrette.

### Garnishes

100 g roasted, shelled hazelnuts, Selection of wild sorrels, Grated hard-boiled eggs, Vinaigrette, Truffle Cream

### Vinaigrette

2 tbs reduced meat stock, 2 tbs hazelnut oil, 1 tbs sherry vinegar  
Small amount of minced shallots and chives

Combine all ingredients well, adjust seasoning.

### Wild Boar Kromeski

500 g boar or pig's head cheeks, temple and snout (this will make much more than needed), 250 g finely diced carrot, celery, and shallot, 1 tsp Chinese five spice powder, 1 tsp ground quatre épices, 100 ml balsamic vinegar, 50 ml pork sauce, 6 leaves gelatine, softened and drained, 35 g dried chantarelles, soaked and squeezed, then finely chopped, Flour for dusting, Beaten egg wash, Bread crumbs for dredging, Oil for deep frying

Combine all ingredients. This is just a guide to proportions – add stock carefully so it doesn't become too wet. Roll into large sausages then firm in the freezer. Slice into rounds and dust with flour, then dip in egg wash and coat with bread crumbs. Right before service, fry rounds until golden and crisp.

restaurant. “After bouts of drinking, men take leftover boiled meat and fry it into *kromeski*, like croquettes. It’s very heavy. I was surprised an Australian had even heard of it.” Apparently, hung-over Poles don’t usually make *kromeski* of wild boar with celeriac baked in an ash crust. Too bad. But if they ever want to try it, Graham has kindly provided the recipe here.

#### ***Cooking From Field and Garden***

“I perhaps owe having become a painter to flowers.” – Claude Monet

“Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.” – Frances Bacon

Graham’s reverence for primary ingredients is a rarity in London, where theatricality and celebrity count more. He may be working in an asphalt jungle halfway around the world from his native soil, yet somehow his dishes present an honest earthiness that is not mere lip service to seasonal and natural. Whatever the deficiencies of his formal culinary education, his love of hunting and gardening have earned him a master’s degree in the real nature of food.

Venison is not just venison: it is roe or sika or muntjac, and Graham treats each according to its unique qualities. As an avid hunter, he knows deer habitats and their habits, and thus he enhances their flavors. Where most places serve only one breed of venison, Graham might offer as many as six. The bone-in roe saddle is roasted in the fir branches and sauced with the dried black currants the deer was eating not long ago. This rich, autumnal meat is quite unlike the delicate, summery muntjac. “It’s quite special to hunt a deer, and then see every part eventually used in the restaurant,” says Graham. “I’m also interested in buying whole carcasses of pork, like some amazing 55-day aged Middlewhites or Mangalitzas.” After not serving beef at The Ledbury for 4 years, he is excited to have sourced choice cuts of Belted



Galloway from Cumbria and Red Ruby from Cornwall.

Despite many meals at the Ledbury, it is only after I visit Graham's Richmond home that I feel I finally understand where he is coming from. Turns out we are neighbors, so he offers to make me breakfast. Improbably, a cock crows over the suburban rooftops as I come to the door. The postage stamp front garden, not one meter square, is given over to herbs. The narrow rear garden is rioting with the fruits of summer: tomatoes, radish tadpoles, broccoli, strawberries, squashes, greens, beans, edible flowers. Scratching about the rear is a menagerie of poultry, including the noisy Bresse cockerel destined for tomorrow's pot.

Most of the herbs and garnishes at the Ledbury come from this garden, as does nearly all of breakfast. Graham serves a cocotte of baked quails' eggs along with cornflower-strewn fried hen's eggs, newly laid that morning. His satisfaction at serving food crafted every step by his own hands is quietly palpable. Even the mushrooms were grown in the shed. I calculate the distance from farm to table is about 5 meters.

But how does he find time to garden? Graham says that rather than hitting bars after work, he turns on the backyard floodlight and pulls weeds at 1 AM. "Drives my partner a bit crazy," he admits. Perhaps she'd rather he went to bars?

Graham's chicken studies started at age 14, when he built a henhouse. Killing his first chicken was a crucial formative shock. The meat of a 2-year-old free-range chicken was much darker and tougher than anything he had ever encountered in the supermarket. He and his father manfully decided that they must eat what they had killed. Over the years, he has learned a lot about what makes good chicken, and the tidbit of confited chicken wing he serves with false risotto of new potato is a bite of heaven.

Graham is still learning about chickens. Just after I left, he messaged me with the news that the noisy cock had laid its first egg. He couldn't kill it now. Whoever heard of a crowing hen, or an egg-laying cock? Nature is an endless mystery.

### The Golden Mean

Brett Graham is a man of small ambition. He only wants to have the best restaurant in London. "The best restaurant is not necessarily the place that serves the 'best' food. That's two different things. I want to be the place where people come because they know they will be happy." Talk about a tall order.

The cooking at The Ledbury is innovative yet not in-your-face, classic but not clichéd, contemporary but not faddish. Above all, it aims to be a part of a perfect evening. Graham does not want to make culinary waves; he just wants to make great cuisine part of someone's fantastic night out.

He takes customer satisfaction seriously, and clearly he is doing something right. Although The Ledbury is now a must-eat destination restaurant, there are some 50 clients who have dined there more than 100 times. But surely the ultimate test for customer service is having a dining room full of traumatized victims of mob violence. When the rioters returned, the staff led the customers to safety. Afterwards, they handed out stiff drinks and reassurance. The diners reported to the press nothing but praise for the staff's handling of the situation. On her blog *Naked Sushi*, American Louise Yang regretted the loss of the cheese cart almost as much as her wedding rings.

Beyond being a chef, Graham is a true restaurateur. His personal recipe for success is to make the customer happy. Happiness is impossible to guarantee, but at The Ledbury, they do their best to serve it up.

Lydia Itoi



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# Flame-Grilled Mackerel

with Avocado, Celtic Mustard and Shiso



## Celtic Mustard

6 sheets nori, chopped, 200 g  
Orleans mustard, 400 ml water, 500  
ml olive oil

Add the nori, water and mustard in  
blender and purée until smooth. Slowly  
add the olive oil and emulsify.

## Mackerel

4 large 500-750 g mackerel

Fillet the mackerel and wash fillets, trim  
well and remove blood line.

## Shiso Dressing

20 g bonito flakes, 50 ml water, 60  
ml sherry vinegar, 180 ml soy  
sauce, 100 ml mirin, 2 cloves peeled,  
grated garlic, 10 large purple shiso,  
leaves, crushed, 300 ml grapeseed  
oil

Bring the bonito, water, vinegar, soy  
sauce, mirin, garlic and shiso to the boil.  
Cover and leave to cool. Once cold, add  
the grapeseed oil and strain, discarding  
solids.

## Mackerel Avocado Tartare

100 g raw mackerel, finely chopped,  
35 g avocado, chopped, 10 g  
shiso dressing, Julienned coriander  
(cilantro)

Combine all ingredients and adjust  
seasoning.

## Cucumber Jelly

500 ml cucumber juice, 6 g agar  
agar, Pinch of salt

Boil cucumber juice and agar agar  
together and pour out onto flat surface.  
Allow to set into a thin sheet. Cut the  
sheet of cucumber jelly into rectangles  
suitable for wrapping the tartare into  
pillow shapes. Add a quenelle of tartare  
in the middle of the cucumber jelly  
rectangle wrapper, then roll. Keep cool.

## Garnishes

Oyster leaves, Baby coriander  
(cilantro), Purple shiso sprouts,  
Fried shallots, 1 small cucumber,  
sliced

## To plate

Roast mackerel fillets in skillet until skin is crispy. Gently grill over flames on rock until lightly grilled and gently blackened. Add shiso dressing to a plate and dress the mackerel. Garnish serving plate with mustard, avocado purée, tartare pillow and oyster leaves, coriander and shiso, then top with grilled mackerel fillets. Drizzle with dressing.

# Hand Picked Crab

with Thinly Sliced Courgette, Wakame Oil and Frozen Parmesan



## Wakame Oil

*30 g chives, 15 g parsley, 30 g dill  
300 ml olive oil, 100 g wakame,  
soaked, drained, and chopped*

Blanch chives, parsley and dill for 1 minute and refresh in ice bath. Squeeze out well. Blend all in thermomix and slowly drizzle in 300 ml of olive oil and a touch of salt. Fold in 100 gr of soaked and finely chopped wakame. Infuse.

## Frozen Parmesan Snow

*400 ml milk, 400 ml cream, 8 g salt,  
150 g Parmesan*

Mix milk, cream, salt and Parmesan, warm slowly while whisking, and then infuse for 20 min. Strain, discarding solids. Freeze the infused milk until firm, then quickly blend in robot coupe and reserve in freezer.

## Crab Oil

*500 g crab shells, crushed, 50 g  
tomato paste, 100 ml water, 250 g  
grapeseed oil*

Brown crab shells, add tomato paste, stir till just caramelized, and deglaze with water before it scorches. Pour on olive oil to cover shells. Simmer for 45 minutes, then strain, discarding solids.

## Courgettes

*4 round green courgettes, Sea salt*

Cook the courgettes in well-salted water for approximately 10 minutes, refresh in iced water, and drain. Dry courgettes well and slice thinly on Japanese mandolin. Store slices between 2 layers of plastic film.

## Crab

*250 g hand-picked, boiled  
crabmeat, 1/2 lemon zest, finely  
grated, 20 ml crab oil*

Lightly dress crabmeat with lemon zest, crab oil.

## To plate

*Place a pile of crabmeat in the middle of a shallow bowl; cover with the courgette slices that have been generously dressed with wakame oil. Drizzle with crab oil and top with frozen Parmesan snow.*

# Whipped Ewes' Milk Yoghurt

with Wild and Cultivated Strawberries, Strawberry Sorbet and Verbena Meringues

## Ewe's Milk Yoghurt Mousse

130 g cows' milk, 3 leaves of gelatine, softened in water and drained, 500 g sheep milk yoghurt

Bring milk to the boil, whisk in softened gelatine then let cool. Place cooled milk mixture and yoghurt in robot coupe and blitz to form smooth mousse.

## Whipped Cream

150 g whipping cream, 50 g icing sugar, ½ grated lime zest

Combine all ingredients in mixer and whip till soft peaks form. Whisk in yoghurt mousse. Chill.

## Meringues

200 g sugar, 40 g water, 100 g egg whites, 9 g dried lemon verbena

Combine sugar and water in saucepan, boil to 121° C. Beat egg whites in mixer and slowly beat in hot sugar syrup, whisking constantly. Keep whisking until cool and a strong meringue has formed. Fold in lemon verbena. Spread thinly on tray lined with parchment paper and dry in oven at 90° C dry heat for 17 min. Break in shards or cut in shapes.

## To serve

*Disporre lo yogurt sul piatto usando la tasca da pasticciere e spolverare con le fragole disidratate. Rifornire con le erbe aromatiche, i fiori e le fragole e versare alcune gocce di olio d'oliva. Aggiungere una pallina di sorbetto alla fragola e circondarla di meringhe. Decorare con gocce di purea di fragola.*

## Strawberry Gel Puree

250 g strawberry consommé, 4 g agar agar

Combine ingredients in saucepan. Bring to the boil, whisking constantly. Pour onto tray and allow to set. After it has set, puree and pass through sieve.

## Strawberry Sorbet

500 g strawberry purée, 175 g stock syrup

Combine puree and syrup, whisk and strain. Freeze in sorbet machine.

## Garnishes

*Dehydrated strawberries, sliced or powdered, Herbs, Edible flowers  
A variety of fresh strawberries, wild and cultivated, Olive oil*

