

NOTHING BUT BLUE SKIES

A trip to Australia to judge a restaurant competition was a complete game changer for chef Rick Stein, who has divided his time between here and England ever since.



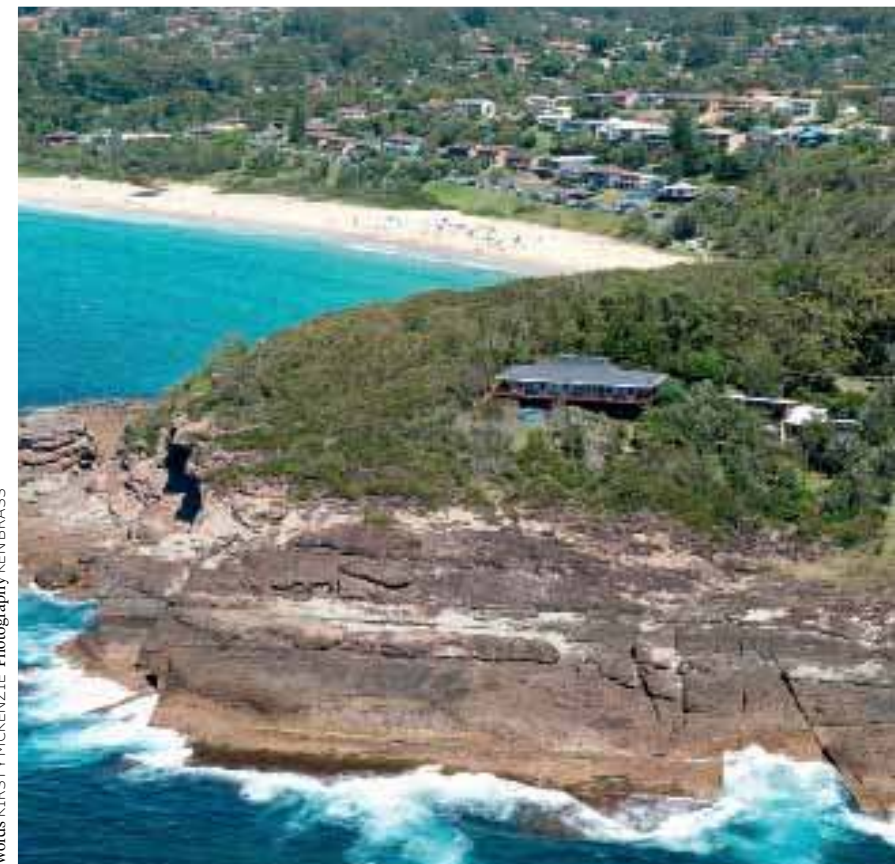
Clockwise from opposite: Seafood guru Rick Stein with his catch of the day; Rick's house and its jacuzzi enjoy splendid ocean views; the house is located at the end of a rocky headland in Mollymook.

In all probability, none of it would have happened if English restaurant critic Simon Hopkinson had been available. The year was 1997 and the then editor of *Australian Gourmet Traveller* Charlie (Carolyn) Lockhart was looking for a foreign judge to choose the winner of the magazine's annual Best Restaurant in Australia Award. Simon was unavailable, so she approached Rick Stein instead.

"What's not to like about three weeks touring Australia, a country I already knew and loved, eating at the best restaurants and drinking fine wine," the affable what-you-see-is-what-you-get chef, author and TV presenter recalls. "It didn't take me very long to accept the invitation."

It's a matter of history that on that tour Rick fell in love with the tour's publicist, Sarah (Sas) Burns, whom he married in 2011. In 2009, Rick and Sas had opened a restaurant called Rick Stein at Bannisters at Mollymook on the NSW South Coast. They also bought a charming '60s beach house just down the road from the restaurant and boutique hotel and use it whenever time allows.

Words: KERSTY MCKENZIE Photography: KEN BRASS





Clockwise from above:
The house won an architecture award when it was built in the 1960s; Rick and Sas decided to build in under the house to create extra space for guests.

"Sas knew the area well from family holidays and I had been there when I first came to Australia in the 1960s," Rick says. "Ever since a memorable weekend of eating Pambula oysters and flathead in Merimbula I've had the image of the clean blue sea and the sweet seafood of the South Coast in my head. And I knew that one day I would open up a restaurant celebrating local seafood."

Of course Rick went on to do just that in his hometown of Padstow on the Cornish coast. Nick-named Padstein by the British media for the influence he has had on the town, Rick and his first wife, Jill, run a their flagship restaurant with rooms and a bistro, a café, a family-friendly fish and chippie, a seafood cooking school, St Petroc's Hotel as well as numerous other guesthouses and B&Bs in Padstow and a pub-brewery, The Cornish Arms, in nearby St Merryn.

So when the opportunity presented itself to repeat the experience at Bannisters, overlooking the ocean at Mollymook, Rick jumped at the chance. He manages to visit about six times a year, for menu overhauls and consultations with local suppliers sandwiched between short bursts of R&R. For the rest of the year Rick and Sas divide their time between Sas's home in Sydney,



"Ever since a weekend spent enjoying seafood in Merimbula I've had the image of the clean blue sea of the South Coast in my head."

Rick adds that he angled to have part of his second TV series filmed in Australia, and remains hopeful that the BBC will one day let him make an entire series here.



Padstow and wherever Rick happens to be filming his latest TV series.

In fact, Rick is no stranger to Australia as he spent two years here in his youth and had visited for family holidays many times during the '80s. "I had started my cheffing career when I first came to Australia," Rick says. "But I had neither the means nor the inclination to investigate the food scene at that time and I imagine there wasn't all that much on offer back then."

Instead he worked his passage around the country, taking jobs as they presented themselves ranging from a ganger on the Ghan Railway near Alice Springs and a stint in an abattoir in Roma, south-western Queensland to a clerk at Sydney's Garden Island and a prescient brush with TV at Channel 10.

"By the time I came back in the '80s the food scene had really taken off here," he recalls. "I also met [winemaker and bon vivant] Len Evans at that time and we went on to become business partners in Tower Estate in the Hunter Valley. Sadly Len passed away and that venture has now been sold, but I have really happy memories of all my trips to Australia."

Rick adds that he angled to have part of his



Clockwise from above: A portrait of Rick's beloved Jack Russell, Chalky, keeps his memory alive in the entrance hall; the downstairs sitting room allows plenty of space for guests to relax; quirky '60s features such as the crazy tiles and metal screen in the entry have been preserved.



Clockwise from above: Rick enjoys a glass of wine in the kitchen with its Vietnamese lobster pot lamp shades; the verandahs are great for outdoor entertaining; seaside references are dotted throughout; a kitchen fit for a TV chef



second TV series filmed in Australia, and remains hopeful that the BBC will be persuaded to let him make an entire series here. "They think that the quality of the existing Australian food media is so high, it's better for us to concentrate on areas that are less well covered."

When *Australian Country* caught up with Rick, he was about to embark on another Mediterranean odyssey, filming in Italy, Greece, Albania, Croatia and Turkey. The program, which will be aired next year, adds to an already impressive portfolio of TV shows, which includes two series on the fruits of the sea in the UK as well as trips through France on a canal barge, Spain, South-East Asia, Japan, the Mediterranean and most recently, India. He was coming to the end of a two-week stint in Australia and had spent a busy morning consulting with fish merchants at Ulladulla about sourcing tuna, mahi mahi and sea urchin for the constantly-evolving menu at Rick Stein at Bannisters.

"I'm lucky to have a great team looking after the place when I am away," Rick says. "We were extremely fortunate when we started to have Julian Lloyd, who had worked with me in Padstow since he was 14, as head chef. Julian's gone back now, but he's been replaced by Paul Goodenough, who also worked with me in England, so the Cornish tradition continues. These guys know me inside out and I can be confident that things will be handled as if I were there all the time."

Rick adds that village life in Mollymook reminds

him of Padstow "with better weather". He and Sarah and her children enjoy holidaying in their beach house, which is available for rent as Rick's Place, when they are not in residence.

The house was built in 1965 for expat Americans John and Margaret Baldwin who retired to Mollymook, because, according to John's research, the water temperature was the most ideal of the entire coastline. The distinctive design with its curved roof and wraparound verandahs was awarded Californian House of the year in 1964. Built from imported Californian Redwood, the house is perched above the beach on what was originally two blocks of land. The Baldwins sold the house eight years later to first minister for the environment in NSW (and Australia), Jack Beale and his wife, Stephanie. The land next door was then sold to the Salters, who at the time of purchase learned that Rick's Place

was also about to be sold to a jockey. Not wanting this chap as a neighbour, they bought the house on the spot.

"When Sas and I came along we had no intention of doing anything but restoring it to its 1960s glory," Rick says. "It represented everything I had loved about Australian beach life. Even the bathrooms with their terrazzo tiles, the black screen in the hall straight out of [60s spy movie] *Dr No*, the heavy sliding doors and the fly screens had to stay. And, of course, the wide, railed verandah all round the house that makes you feel you are at sea on a liner. So we've furnished and decorated the house in that spirit, although with a few contemporary touches such as big comfortable beds, rattan and white linen sofas, plasma TVs with cable connection and some rather charming lampshades in the kitchen made from Vietnamese lobster pots."

The house was further extended in 2011 by adding more bedrooms, a large living area and a



kitchenette downstairs. Rick's Place now boasts five bedrooms and bathrooms and possibly the largest jacuzzi in the country, which is actually a repurposed water tank that can comfortably accommodate all the houseguests at once. It comes as no surprise that the kitchen is cook-friendly with a massive island prep bench, an impressive triple sink, Miele ovens, a splendid Cucina barbecue and fresh herbs growing in half barrels on the verandah.

"It's a test of any cook to go into most holiday houses in the UK, and I suspect, Australia, and produce a decent meal," Rick observes. "Apart from the fact that I do occasional cooking demonstrations here, this is actually our home and I want to be able to cook for my family and guests. The great thing about this house is that it is definitely a holiday house and the whole place is entirely given over to having a good time. It's also great to be able to share that with people when we are not around, because everyone deserves a break from time to time."

For more information on Rick Stein at Bannisters or Rick's Place visit bannisters.com.au.

Clockwise from above: A retro metal screen divides the entrance area; although the house is available for holiday rental, family portraits and memorabilia are displayed throughout; the mosaic tiles on the bathroom walls and floor are original.



"The great thing about this house is that it is definitely a holiday house and the whole place is entirely given over to having a good time. It's great to share it."