

The well travelled Liam Tomlin

29 Oct 2005 by JR

In today's restaurant world chefs travel as widely as the ingredients they use. But it is unlikely that any have travelled quite as extensively, enjoying en route such success followed by such professional heartbreak, as Liam Tomlin who was in London recently to give copies of his new book *Season to Taste* to his friends, many of whom are now top chefs across the capital.

When I met Tomlin I began by asking whether he had any idea of quite how many thousands of miles he had travelled over the past 20 years as a chef but he only furrowed his brow – making him look even more like a benign James Cagney – and replied in the soft Irish brogue that has not left him despite his travels, "You know, I haven't the faintest idea but it must be an awful lot."

Tomlin grew up in Dublin, became fascinated by cooking while staying with his uncle then General Manager of the Portmeirion Hotel in Wales before his initial years as a chef took him to London, Amsterdam and Switzerland. When aged 24 he was offered the opportunity to go to Melbourne for a year. "I ended up staying for 14 years, opening up **Restaurant 41** in Sydney before in 1998 we took on an empty shell that was to become **Banc**. It took off from day one and we were voted the best restaurant in Australia by the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Australian Gourmet Traveller*."

The following four years were tremendously exciting as Sydney hosted the 2000 Olympics and new ventures followed in quick succession – **Private Banc**, **Wine Banc** and the opening of **GPO** (a food and restaurant emporium on the site of the city's first General Post Office) – to such an extent that the company had a staff of over 400 and there were plans to take Banc overseas. "Jan and I," Tomlin explained referring to his wife whom he met 22 years ago working at the London Hilton, "even flew over to New York to look at a hotel site that Donald Trump had offered us but that came to nothing." He smiled ruefully.

Nor sadly did the Banc business because Tomlin and his other partners had chosen the wrong financial backer in Rodney Adler who soon became involved in, and was then found guilty of, Australia's biggest corporate fraud. And the restaurant became guilty by association. "My former partner and I bought the business back ourselves but it was too late. We were still looked on as part of his business empire. It had been such a successful business with customers like the Murdochs, the Packers and Mikhail Gorbachev, but they just disappeared. I lost everything that I had." When I pressed Tomlin to say exactly how much the Banc experience had cost him financially, he looked down at the ground and muttered, "I'd rather not say." but his expressive face seemed to crumple at the memory.

It was, Tomlin, decided the time to move on. "I was 38 and I came to the conclusion that if I didn't leave Australia now I never would. I had come for a year and stayed for 14 and although it had given me the opportunity to travel and cook throughout Asia as well I wanted pastures new. A friend offered me a job in Philadelphia and I worked there for a while and I was being offered jobs back in big hotels but I had come to the conclusion that they really weren't for me. Then I got a call from another Irish chef, Conrad Gallagher, who was working in Cape Town, saying that there was an awful lot going on in the restaurants down there. We came down, had a look and we have been here very happily for the past two years. The food scene reminds me very much of what Sydney was like 15 years ago."

Tomlin is currently advising several property developers on restaurants and bars in new developments; advising Woolworths on their food range; talking to the operators of the Blue Train about a role improving their food on board; and looking at potential restaurant sites of his own although, as he admitted, "if Jan and I take on another restaurant I will want to have total control, to be in there from 7am to midnight so this time it will have to be perfect."

In the interim, the time away from the heat of the kitchen is allowing Tomlin to become aware of the challenges ahead. "There are some very good chefs here, both black and white, but the biggest difficulty is service. The wages are so low, perhaps 70 rand (£7) for an eight hour shift, that it is very, very hard to recruit, inspire and hold on to the right calibre of waiting staff. On top of that the best produce whether it is seafood, meat, vegetables or fruit goes overseas for export – fish that you see on the quay as soon as it is landed is immediately packed off for London or Tokyo – and even what does stay on the domestic market can be hugely variable in quality. And then, of course, there is the violence. Recently, in what looks like an ominous new trend, two high profile restaurants have been held up on a Monday morning and their weekend takings stolen by men who had come in the week before ostensibly looking for work but actually casing the place."

But despite, or perhaps because of these professional and personal challenges, Tomlin feels comfortable in Cape Town, more so than he ever did in Sydney. "The lifestyle really appeals – it is 40 minutes to the wine country and less than 10 to the beach. And from a business perspective Cape Town will only become more attractive because the amount of foreign investment will bring in even more customers. At the moment the area is packed in the summer and very, very quiet in the winter even though it's quite mild. But I am sure that will change."

As we were about to leave, Tomlin shows me with considerable pride a recent article from the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled 'The town that Banc built' which refers to nine chefs who at one time or another worked for Tomlin at Banc and have now gone on to achieve great things since he left (another Brett Graham, 26, is the Head Chef of **The Ledbury**, London W11). It would be wonderful for the South African economy, its tourism industry and, above all, for its future visitors if Tomlin were now to have the same impact in and around Cape Town.

Season to Taste is published by Struik in South Africa at 275 rand and will be distributed in the UK by New Holland.

Liam Tomlin's recommended restaurants

CAPE TOWN

Haiku, 33 Church Street, 27.21.424 7000

Dutch (for breakfast), 34 Napier Street, 27.21.4250157

Caveau, 92 Bree Street, 27.21.422 1367

CAPE WINELANDS

Le Quartier Francais, Franschhoek, 27.21.8762151

La Colombe, Constantia, 27.21.4250157

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