



urban g'riller

The first things one notices about "Urban Provider" Nico Moretti are that he's glowing with good health and vitality, he loves what he does and he has a bloody good kitchen. **Isabelle McKay** joins one of his classes.

AS 10 WOMEN and one man filter in to his Leederville home one Friday afternoon clutching bottles of wine, the genial Canadian with a wide smile explains that after years of working in the oil industry, he decided to take the plunge and pursue his passion.

Eight years later, he has a foodie's dream job, with more than 25 cooking classes up his sleeve at his home-based cooking school and running regular gourmet retreats to exotic places.

He says cooking was always in his blood – he grew up around the first Italian restaurant in Ontario, which his father opened in the 1950s.

"But I'm not a chef, I'm a cook," he says, dressed casually in jeans to prove the point.

"I've designed the classes so it's very approachable; from people that love to cook and want to add a few more recipes to their repertoire to people who have no idea but want to learn. And people who don't even like to cook but just like to eat.

"Because I'm self-taught, I like to keep things as simple as possible, but the dishes are designed to impress friends and family."

This is the Balinese Passions class – and having run gourmet luxury retreats to Ubud for the past five years, Nico has clearly drawn on the knowledge of traditional chefs combined with locally sourced produce.

His passion for Bali is also evident in his home, where light beams in through bi-fold doors looking out onto a sub-tropical garden with its gentle waterfall, statues, lanterns and a colourful hammock strewn with fat cushions – and there's even Balinese music tinkling away in the background.

But the giant gourmet kitchen is definitely the home's centrepiece. As glasses of wine are downed and delicious spices are passed around to sniff and taste, the group crammed around the kitchen bench, including several devoted regulars, quickly becomes animated.

The first dish – which Nico whips up in minutes – is pork in a sweet soy sauce, traditionally eaten at ceremony times. Sautéing shallots and garlic, he then browns a kilo of diced pork fillet in small batches before throwing in 80g of thinly sliced ginger. To cater for a gluten intolerant attendee, he whips up a

batch of kecap manis – a sweet soy sauce which is a key ingredient of many Balinese dishes – using one tablespoon of wheat free tamarini to three of palm sugar syrup.

A splash of salty soy, a dash of pepper, chicken stock and two red chillies completes the simple dish, which bubbles away enticingly on the stove for the next 20 minutes and reduces to a glossy sheen.

Next up is homemade basa genep – or "Bumbu Bali" – a traditional spice paste. To save time, Nico makes up big batches and freezes it in muffin trays lined with glad bake, in four-tablespoon portions – enough for a kilo of meat. While he grinds coriander, pepper, cardamoms and sesame in a mortar and pestle, we obligingly sniff the samples of ginger, galangal and fresh turmeric that's so pungent it makes me sneeze.

He explains that as well as being the basis for many Balinese curries, turmeric is widely used in herbal tonics in Bali, as it is a natural antiseptic. In some parts, it is rubbed onto cuts or even shredded and stuffed into belly buttons to cure tummy ache.

Proving he is indeed a man of the people who cooks by trial and error, Nico suddenly remembers that he has to get to the dessert – a black rice pudding – on the boil.

With black rice hard to find in Perth, he substitutes glutinous Thai sweet red rice soaked overnight to which white rice had later been added. Rinsing the rice, he plonked it in a Thermomix with a litre of water (a saucepan can also be used) to be boiled down for at least an hour into a thick porridge.

"You don't want to use a rice cooker – you need to be able to stir it," he says.

Turning back to the curry paste, he explains that shrimp paste is optional for Western cooks but would not be in Bali or Thailand.

"Shrimp paste is like the vegemite of south-east Asia ... it really is an essential part of the curry paste and gives it some complexity," he says.

He pulses it with chilli, ginger, galangal, oil and water and lemongrass bashed and chopped with a ceremonial knife before adding the dry ingredients and frying the mix until aromatic.

Bursting with flavour and heat, the paste is then used to coat five halved chicken breasts. Shallots, garlic, chilli, lemon grass, lime and Nico's home-made sambal tomat – spicy tomato relish that he whips up during the class from oven roasted tomato and spices – are then combined with the shredded chicken, cherry tomatoes, kaffir lime, coriander and cabbage.

We're all drooling at the sight. However, he pushes the salad aside to quickly whip up another of Bali's signature dishes – satay ayam.

The delectable sauce – ground roasted peanuts with sambal tomat, garlic, coconut milk, palm sugar, tamarind and fish sauce – is boiled up in a matter of minutes. It is then painted onto chicken sliced lengthways and threaded onto skewers which are grilled on the BBQ.

Just before Nico finishes the first dishes, his wife Belinda appears and, without a word, whisks around the kitchen restoring its order.





A naturopath, she too glows with health, which Nico puts down the family's habit of eating only the freshest ingredients – a trend he incorporates into his classes.

"We eat really, really well – we eat naturally and don't buy a lot of processed foods," he says. "It's very rare that we have packet or tinned stuff – that's how I grew up."

We are silenced by the satay chicken, which is amazingly tender, and the salad, a simple but outstanding tumble of flavour and textures. Nico busies himself with the accompaniments to the main course – mei goreng and sambal green beans – as we half watch, intent instead on cleaning our plates.

"We had our Sri Lankan class last night, which was really spicy, so we used up all our tissues," he apologises as we eat.

Even though I'm full, it's impossible to refuse the small pot of black rice pudding. Sweet and sticky with a caramelised flavour, using real vanilla and a drizzle of creamy coconut, it's one of the best desserts I've ever tried. In fact, I realise, every dish was for superior to much of the food I was served up on a recent trip to Bali.

As we roll out the door, one of the kids appears and Nico's Pomeranian-pug cross and beagle bowl ecstatically into the lounge room from where they've been locked away.

The cooking school is back to being a home again – so I wonder whose turn it is to do the dishes?

AYAM PANGGANG SAMBAL MATAH (BALINESE CHICKEN SALAD)

- 2 chicken breasts, filleted (cut in half horizontally)
- 2 tbs Balinese Curry Paste
- 4 shallots, peeled and finely sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and finely sliced
- 1 red chilli, deseeded and finely sliced
- 1 stalk lemongrass, bruised and finely chopped
- 2 tbs oil
- 1/4 head of cabbage, finely shredded
- 1 punnet cherry tomatoes, halved
- juice from 1 – 2 limes, to taste
- 1 tbs Sambal Tomat, to taste (or substitute with 2 tsp Sambal Oelek, to taste)
- 4 kaffir lime leaves, shredded
- 1 tbs fresh coriander, chopped

Coat chicken breast with curry paste and grill for 3 minutes each side, or until just cooked through. Place on a plate, cover with foil and let rest while preparing salad.

Prepare dressing by mixing together shallots, garlic, chilli, lemongrass, lime juice, sambal tomat and oil.

Shred chicken and place in bowl with shredded cabbage. Toss through dressing, then gently mix in cherry tomatoes, coriander and kaffir lime leaves. Serve.

SATAY AYAM (CHICKEN SATAY) AND HANDMADE SATAY SAUCE

- 12 bamboo skewers, soaked in water for half an hour
- 2 chicken breasts, filleted (cut in half horizontally)
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 3 tbs oil
- 2 tbs fried shallots
- 2 tsp soy sauce
- 4 tsp kecap manis (sweet soy sauce)
- 2 tsp black pepper
- 4 kaffir lime leaves, finely shredded
- fried shallots to garnish

Slice chicken into 2cm thick strips or 2cm x 2cm cubes. Mix all ingredients together in a bowl with chicken until meat is well coated. Cover and leave to marinate for at least 10 minutes (overnight if you like).

Thread chicken onto skewers and grill for about 4 minutes each side, basting with marinade.

Serve with satay sauce.

BUMBU KACANG (SATAY SAUCE)

- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 1 1/2 tbs oil
- 2 tsp Sambal Tomat (or substitute with 1 tsp Sambal Oelek or 2 tsp Thai Red Curry Paste)
- 2/3 cup coconut milk
- 3 tbs roasted peanuts, ground
- 1-2 tbs palm sugar, grated
- 1 tsp tamarind
- 1 tbs fish sauce

Heat oil in a small sauce pan and lightly sauté garlic until aromatic, then add sambal tomat and cook for 30 seconds, until aromatic. Add coconut milk and bring to the boil. Reduce heat and stir in remaining ingredients.

Cook for 5 minutes, stirring constantly to prevent sticking. Serve. 🌟

