

organic & health foods

Health guru's healing foods

Australia's top spa chef celebrates food as medicine with a contemporary culinary twist.

It's quite a title - Australia's leading spa chef - but that's Sam Gowing for you.

It's no ideal boast either. Sam has worked at Australia's leading health retreats and was founding executive chef and nutritionist at the newest one, Cabarita Ocean Health Retreat. She has worked her magic with food at Kahanda Kanda retreat in Sri Lanka, the Four Seasons in Bali and the Kempinski in Zanzibar.

Bon vivant Matt Preston calls her a guru. "She is the font of wisdom when it comes to tasty, healthy eating."

Vue de Monde's Shannon Bennett gives a glowing review of her talents on the cover of her new book *The Healing Feeling*.

Singer Clare Bowditch is also a devotee: "Whenever I'm run down, flat out, over-roasted, or in need of some professional 'energy support', she is the one I call."

But that's only half Sam's story. Just in case you think her a Johnny-come-lately in the business of dishing up fabulous food, consider this: Sam was just 24 in 1990 when she signed on as the licensee of the gritty Grace Darling Hotel, (the hotel where the Collingwood Football Club was formed) and set about transforming it from sticky carpet beer den to award-winning gastro pub. Numerous accolades, including a couple of chef's hats, was her reward.

"It was quite some education," she says of those years. "It certainly taught me to call a spade a spade." But it was the death from cancer of her salesman father, Dennis Gowing, the man better known as Kevin Dennis the car king, that stoked her passion for health and prompted her to leave Collingwood and pub life and retrain as a nutritionist.

Sam now lives, as you might expect, in Byron Bay. Along her journey she acquired qualifications in yoga and Pilates and has just graduated as a master of Gastronomic Tourism.

She calls her food philosophy Surf Spa Food. "It celebrates food as medicine with a contemporary culinary twist. Every last morsel you



put in your mouth should be doing something good for you. It should also taste unbelievable as well.

"Eating well is not about denying yourself the good things in life."

Sam's certainly not about denying herself what's great about life and doesn't think anyone else needs to these days.

She still loves a glass of French and has a punt on the ponies - her father's horse What A Nuisance won the Melbourne Cup in 1985 so she's got

Healing feeling: Sam Gowing says every morsel you put in your mouth should be doing something good for you.

Photo: Portrait by Bayleigh Vedelago

form - but nothing, she says, beats the feeling of being healthy.

"It's not difficult or even complicated to eat well. Sometimes it's just a matter of making minor adjustments to your diet but the rewards are so extraordinary.

"Nothing compares to feeling the best you can and that's only possible if you are eating well. I've seen people bloom and transform when they discover how fantastic they feel."

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SAM'S TOP TIPS

Cook with high quality oils

Macadamia oil because of its smooth buttery flavour and 210° C smoke point (compared to 190° C for olive oil) is a good choice. Organic coconut oil is another. Ensure you buy certified organic coconut oil as conventional products may have added solvents such as hexane, which is used to extract cooking oils from seeds. I use olive oil to sauté over a very low heat,

and use it predominantly as a finishing oil for salads and in dressings.

Beware of hidden trans-fats

These highly processed, hydrogenated oils provide a crunch to biscuits, cereals and crackers but trans-fats are very difficult for the body to breakdown and eliminate.

Choose a local mineral salt rather than imported

We are part of the local ecosystem and so it makes sense to buy local mineral

dense condiments just as much as buying locally grown fruit and vegetables. (So if it's a choice between Murray river salt vs Celtic sea salt, go for the local brand.)

Buy local organic rather imported organic

Befriend your market farmers and ask them directly what sprays they use, if any. You might find that they follow organic procedures but are not certified.

Whereas imported fruit and

vegetables with an organic certificate may have been sitting in quarantine and ripened in transit under fluorescent light and air-conditioning.

Mince your own meat

Or, ask your butcher to from one piece of rump, breast or leg, rather than buy plastic wrapped packets. This will guarantee your mince comes from the one animal and not the by-product of off-cuts from several beings. Grass-fed red meat and organic poultry please!

Always add seaweed to legumes

A few strands will help detoxify the beans and boost the mineral content, as well as help breakdown the resistive starch. Seaweed helps to kill yeast overgrowth in the gut.

Swap chocolate for raw cacao

Jam-packed with antioxidants, magnesium and bliss nutrients that can help keep you energised.

Use coconut sugar

It is naturally low on the Glycemic Index (GI), which has benefits for weight control and improving glucose levels in people with diabetes. Its GI rating is 35. In comparison, most commercial honey is GI 55 and cane sugars are GI 68.

The Healing Feeling: Recipes and Remedies from Australia's Leading Spa Chef by Samantha Gowing (\$45 including postage and the ebook is \$19.95)

Salad days: Sam Gowing's nutritious kelp salad (left)
Photo: Nigel Carboon
Hazelnut and cacao cake (above).