

Bumper Life & Leisure liftout – inside today



The new culinary frontier

Top chef Steve Manfredi reveals his passion for home-grown produce and explains why it's the key to his success. **Plus:** Italy's hidden gem, sexy Berlin, the finest fashion, motoring, wine and more. **Plus:** Bonus 8-page boating special. **In your 32-page Life & Leisure centre liftout.**

Photo: NIC WALKER

FOOD



Manfredi — for whom the Bells toll

Manfredi – for whom the Bells toll

Steve Manfredi continues to redefine culinary frontiers, this time at Killcare on the NSW Central Coast, writes **Lyndall Crisp**.

As the train chugged into Florence station, Steve Manfredi used to look up at the dense apartment blocks and smile at the sight of the balconies – nearly every one of which boasted a vegetable garden.

Italians love their home-grown produce and as Manfredi says, you don't need much space to produce enough for a family.

At Bells Restaurant and luxury retreat at Killcare, 120 kilometres north of Sydney, this award-winning chef and author has created a 60 square metre veggie garden which supplies most of the 80-seat dining room's needs, and he's about to extend it.

The garden produces about six kilos of four varieties of tomatoes every day, chicory, broccoli, radicchio, eggplant, sugar loaf lettuce, lamb's tongue lettuce, capsicum, chillies, carrots, radishes and herbs – all chemical free. The big pests are rabbits and wild deer.

Bells was a guest house built in 2000 and run by former banker Ian Bell, who sold it last year for \$4 million to the Coast and Country Properties syndicate that includes John Singleton. The syndicate also paid \$3.7 million for Headlands, a boutique resort at nearby Pretty Beach, which is being renovated. Manfredi will oversee the menus at both places.

There are 11 cottages – three are new – in Bells' beautifully laid-out gardens and plans for a residential cooking school. The main house,

with library and bar, was gutted, opened up and decorated by interior designer Chrissie Jefferies who used Yves Klein blue with white as the main colour theme.

The blue glassware in the restaurant, which spills onto a wide veranda, was produced by Canberra glass blower Jonathan Baskett, and the white crockery by ceramic artist Rod Bamford, from McMasters Beach down the road.

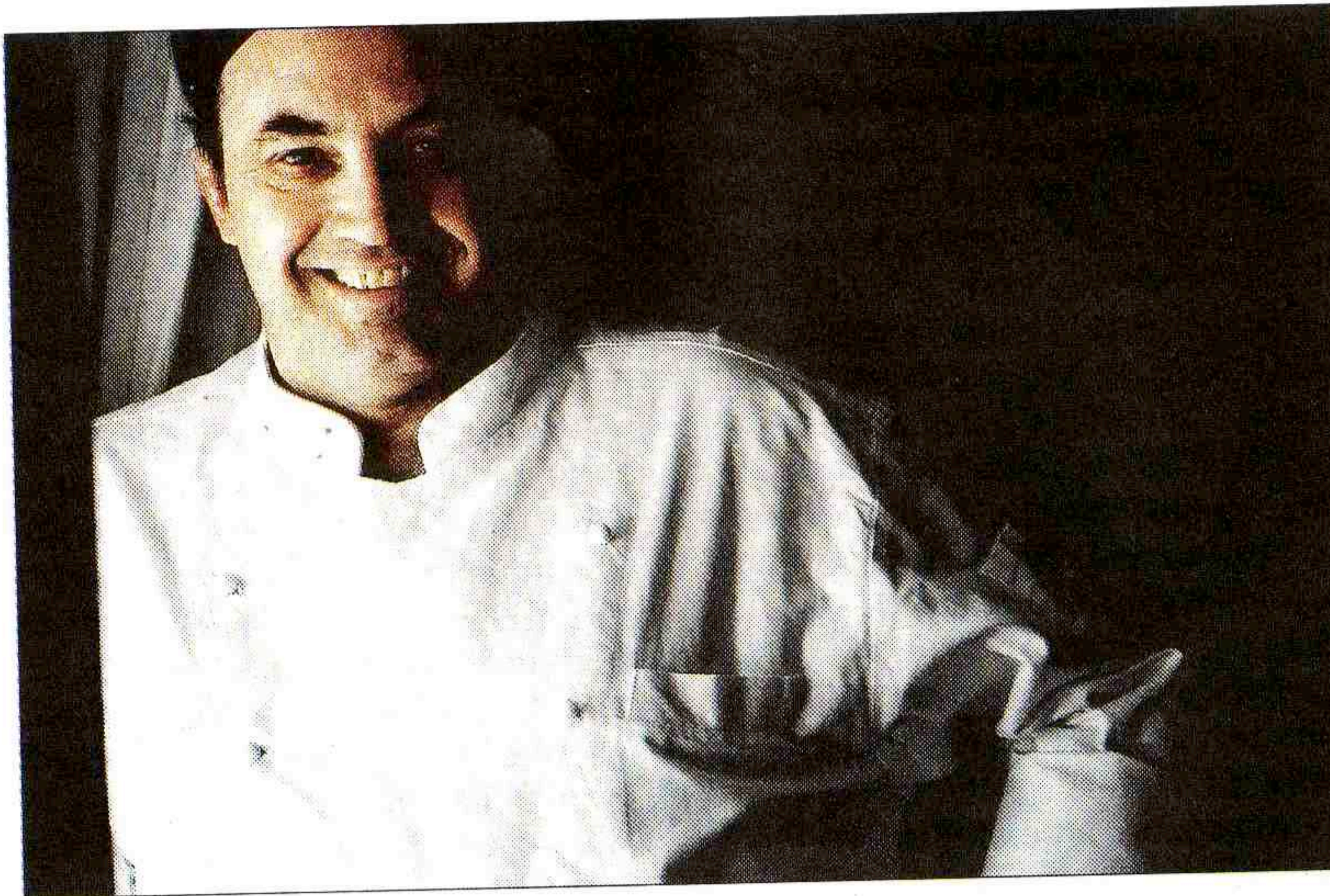
Manfredi – who is best known for his two earlier eateries: The Restaurant and bel mondo – works at Bells from Thursday to Sunday with five chefs.

He takes enormous pride in his fresh produce and the 33 chooks that supply him with free range eggs and manure which, with the recycled organic waste from the kitchen, makes perfect compost for the garden.

Many of the exotic vegetables come from seeds he's bought on the internet and which aren't grown anywhere else in Australia. They include the knobby skin, sweet flesh Marina di Chioggia pumpkin from near Venice.

Sourcing other products for his Mediterranean-style menu takes him far afield. His brand of coffee, Espresso di Manfredi, comes from the Dutch coffee company in which he's a partner, Douwe Egberts, and is so popular that he sells it from a small shop near the reception desk. He and master roaster Wayne Archer roast the special brand in Sydney.

He also sells litre bottles of his olive oil from Sicily. "I have mixed feelings about Australian olive oil," he says. "It's good to encourage local industry but you need to have benchmarks. Too much poor olive oil is sold at ridiculous prices. The bottles are imported from Italy and filled here and sold for higher prices as gifts. It's about the fancy bottle, not the use.



Steve Manfredi in the 33-bird chook house (above) and (left) ready for work in the new restaurant. **Photos** Nic Walker

His family bought little bottles of the essential fluid [olive oil] from the local chemist where it was sold with an eye dropper for ear problems.

"People plant without doing the research, before working out where to grow [the trees] and where they will thrive."

But we've come a long way since the days he remembers as a child when olive oil for cooking wasn't produced at all in Australia. His family bought little bottles of the essential fluid from the local chemist where it was sold with an eye dropper for ear problems.

One of the many advantages of Bells' location high on the Bouddi Peninsula, besides the proximity to six pristine surf beaches and the bush setting, is that it serves the community as a mini upmarket deli. Fresh bread is baked daily, extra loaves when someone rings in an order.

If only he'd make commercial quantities of his rose petal gelato (a Singleton favourite) made from Mr Lincoln highly perfumed roses, his fig jam and toasted granola, he'd be on a winner.

Manfredi was six years old when he arrived in Australia with his family in 1961. He still visits relatives in the remote village where he was born: Gottolengo, 30 km south of Lake Garda in the

north of Italy. Many of them have never even been to the nearest city, Milan, so their home cooking is unaffected by city trends. Manfredi's mother Franca has also been a big influence.

Many of his clients come from Sydney and Palm Beach is only a 20-minute ferry ride away. But on Tuesday nights, to encourage locals through the door, he offers a "Tuesday is locals' night" menu – \$35 for a two-course dinner and a glass of Verdicchio or Montepulciano. Accommodation ranges from a midweek special for \$250 per cottage with a breakfast hamper to an "indulgence package" for \$1150 including two consecutive nights, breakfast hampers, two three-course lunch or dinners and two one-hour massages.

While he spends the rest of the week in the city with his family, writing food columns and pursuing other business interests, Manfredi is at home in Killcare.

"I used to surf in the area as a teenager and sleep in the car park at Avoca," he says.

Bells is open for dinner seven nights a week; lunch Thursday to Sunday.