

TABLES

TOP OF THE HILL

Stefano Manfredi is reaping the benefits from his new coastal locale, writes **Susan Kurosawa**

KILLCARE Bells could be the closest approximation of a European country-house hotel you could reasonably expect to find in an Australian coastal setting. There are rooms attached (in this case, six pastel cottages) and a wide veranda in the loggia tradition. Glasses of the softest Montepulciano red are being encouragingly clinked, and diners are nibbling slivers of pecorino and gorgonzola piccante. Overseeing proceedings, in starched chef's whites and jaunty blue cap, is renowned Sydney chef Stefano Manfredi, who has transplanted his mod Italian fare to a bushy clifftop on the NSW central coast.

Squint and it could be Tuscany, but things take a turn Down Under when Manfredi leads diners past flower-filled urns and fig and olive trees to his flourishing herb and vegetable patch. Here, wire barricades keep out the native brush turkeys; circling above is an emerald-flecked cloud of screech-

SAMPLE MENU

- Chilled tomato and thyme broth with steamed mussels (\$17)
- Grilled quail with roast eschallots, spinach and currants (\$21, \$34)
- Tagliatelle with Moreton Bay bugs, sesame seeds and parmesan (\$23)
- Barbecued duck breast with balsamic vinegar and Italian coleslaw (\$36)
- Rice and mustard fruit torta with spiced zabaglione (\$14.50)
- Raspberry, pistachio and vanilla cassata (\$14.50)

ing rainbow lorikeets. Over the gravel road, through wild acacia and heath, walking tracks lead to Putty Beach with its rockpools, sandy campsites and kookaburra wake-up calls.

The John Singleton-owned Killcare Bells was formerly run by hoteliers Ian

and Leonie Bell, whose vision was more English estate than seaside villa. The new proprietor and his manager-hosts, Karina and Brian Barry, formerly at Singleton's Bluetongue Brewery in the NSW Hunter Valley, have softened the overstuffed decor of the main homestead with a coastal makeover in sea-and-sand colours. There are pale-striped banquettes, polished floors, blue water glasses and wait staff in long continental aprons.

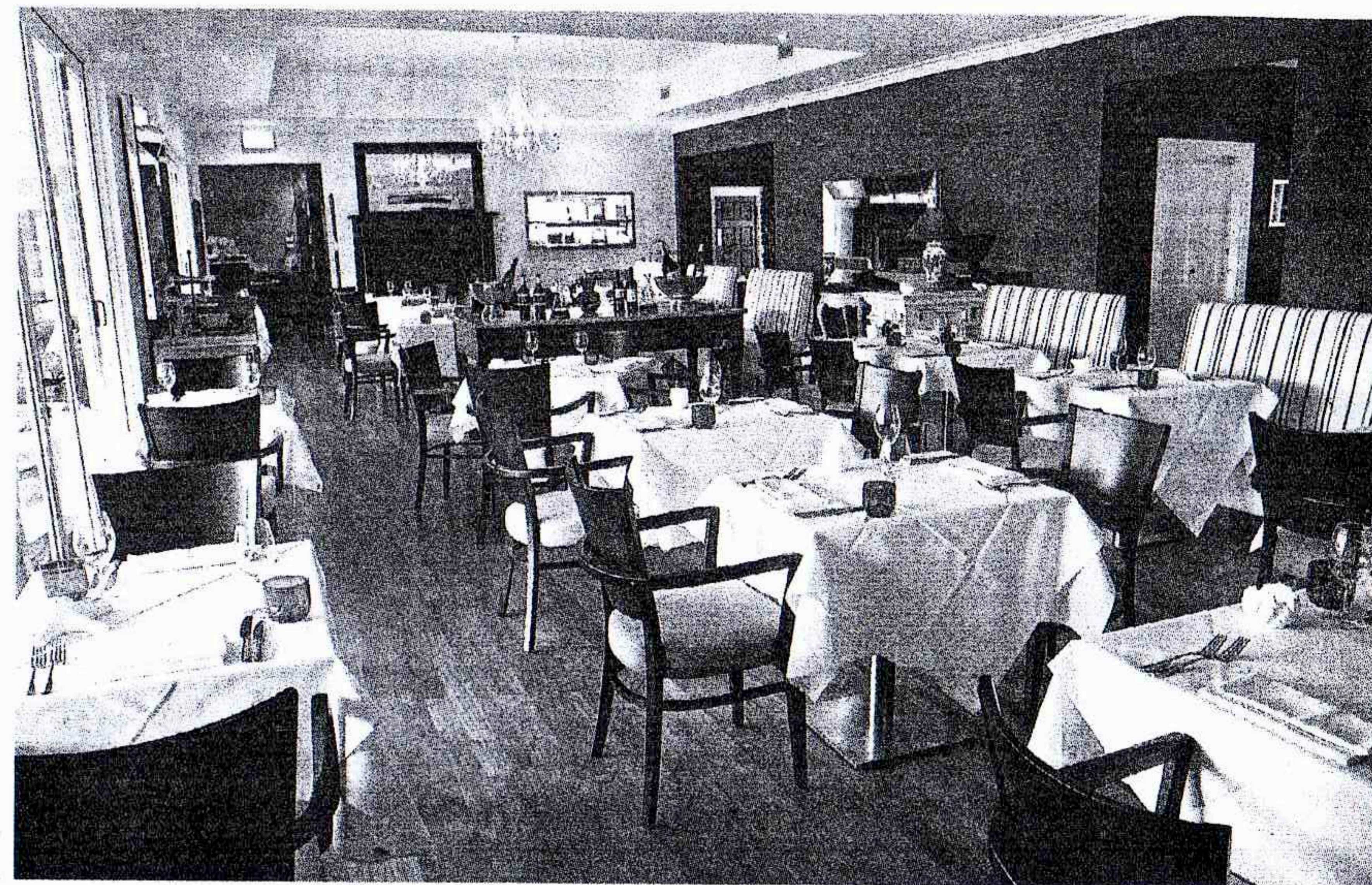
The main room is light and airy, and the covered veranda, although more casual, has the same chic feel. There are private dining rooms, too, one of which is occupied during our Saturday dinner by girls in petticoats (or perhaps I am too old to appreciate the finer points of spaghetti-strap frocks).

I like my spag on a plate and we have come to the right place. When Manfredi was in charge of The Restaurant (later Restaurant Manfredi) at Ultimo, I dined there about once a fortnight, usually opting for sublime

pasta of myriad styles from the magical pot of his mother, Franca.

The freshly shucked oysters are from Shoalhaven (\$4 each), and my partner and I order three apiece while we study the big white menu card. It's not a vast listing and it shouldn't take long, but the excellent oysters, served on a bed of scattered shells, have been happily demolished before we can decide. I want to order everything.

Delays are caused, too, by our neighbours from down the road stopping to chat and the appearance of a colleague from *The Australian* and his partner (who would prefer Killcare Bells be kept a neighbourhood secret, so I pretend my Moleskine reviewer notebook is for emergency shopping lists). There is a definite buzz in the room, and Manfredi clearly is enjoying chatting at most of the tables. In the open kitchen, chef Cameron Cansdell, late of the De Bortoli winery restaurant in Victoria's Yarra Valley, can be spied in a glistening blur of steam.



Beachy keen: The restaurant at Killcare Bells is inviting with its sea-and-sand colour scheme

My entree of zucchini flowers stuffed with taleggio and fried in a light batter (\$18) is the only disappointment of the night. The serve is too big (not a real complaint, I know) and the creamy, yeasty taleggio cheese is so rich it overpowers the delicacy of the zucchini. My partner's panfried scal-

lops with crushed potatoes and caper and walnut salsa (\$20) proves to be a daintier choice, full of tart flavours and springy texture.

The first risotto I tasted was at The Restaurant in the 1980s, and it spurred a passion that has led me to attempt home-made versions (dodgy success) and conduct many restaurant surveys (patchy results). Tonight, there is a crayfish risotto special (\$45) and it is unquestionably sublime, the best of any stripe I've tasted since, well, Manfredi closed his Ultimo eatery in the early 1990s.

There are generous strips of local crayfish from the waters off nearby Wagstaffe Point stirred through the perfectly cooked arborio rice with super-fine ribbons of zucchini.

My partner's roast suckling lamb with salsa dragoncello and roast potatoes (\$39) is an equal success. The Flinders Island lamb is cooked to medium-rare perfection; the bread-based salsa dragoncello is a Manfredi specialty, fragrant with tarragon leaves torn from the stem, ample garlic and sloshes of red wine vinegar.

A leaf salad (\$9) on the side is a good sauce-mopper, and many of the crisp ingredients, as we discover on an impromptu tour of Manfredi's turkey-free garden, have been gathered mere metres from the veranda.

For the *dolci* course (the menu comes with a firm Italian touch, from

primi to formaggi), my meringue served with jasmine-poached apricots and passionfruit (\$14.50) is a delicious take on a pavlova, hold the cream peaks and kiwifruit.

Himself's buttermilk pannacotta with mango cheeks and prosecco jelly (\$14.50) is *la dolce vita* writ sweet and large, enlivened with the dry, lemony fizz of a good prosecco.

The Bells Killcare house red, available by the glass, is a 2006 Umani Ronchi Montepulciano d'Abruzzo (\$8), which is satin-smooth and seems the perfect drop for dinner at our local osteria within cooe of the surf.

All *Tables* visits are unannounced and meals paid for.

Checklist


Killcare Bells
107 The Scenic Rd, Killcare Heights, NSW. (02) 4360 2411;
www.killcarebells.com.au.

Open: Dinner seven days from 6.30pm; lunch on Fridays and at weekends.

Cost: About \$165 for two, with three courses and glasses of house wine.

Drink: Well-balanced wine list (limited selection by the glass); excellent gin and tonics (\$8).

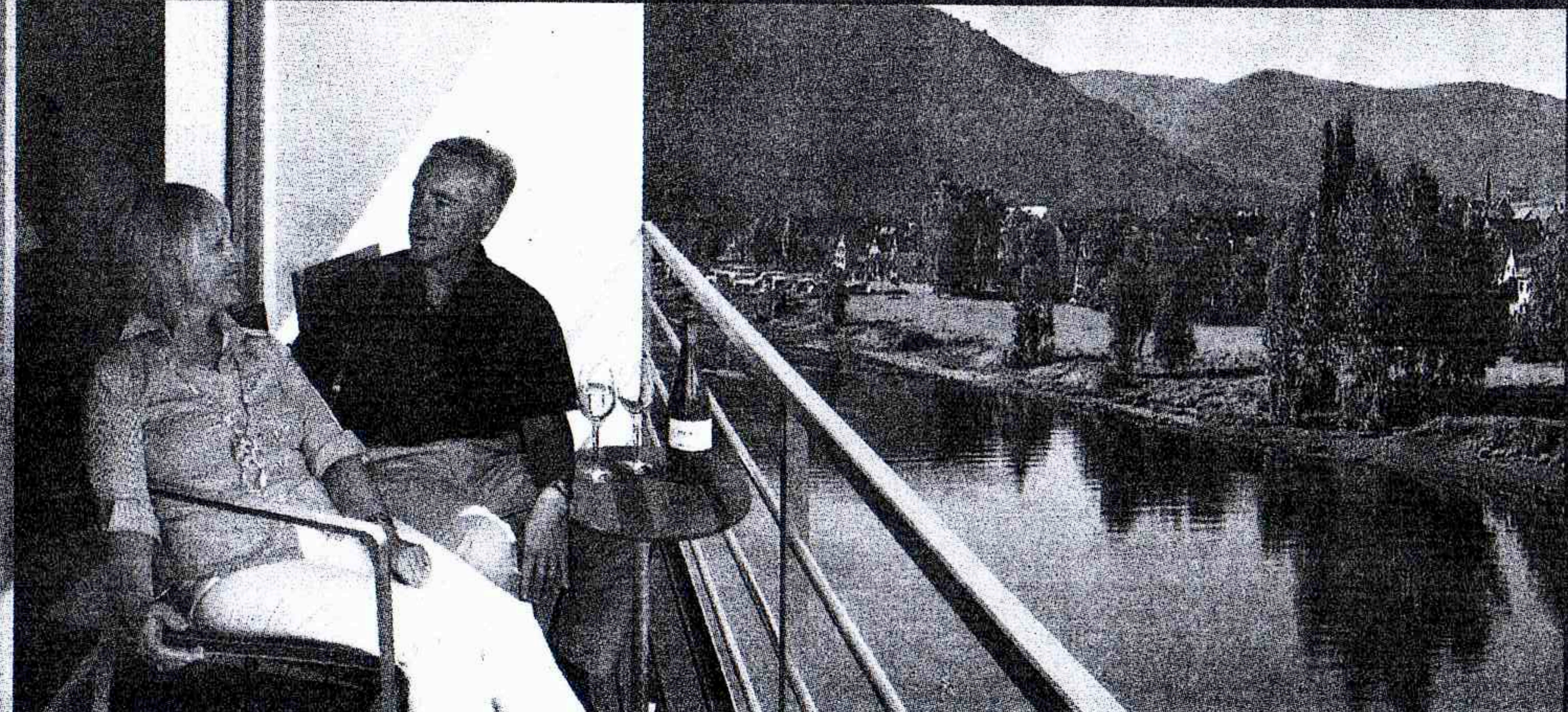
Reason to return: Jazz and croquet lunches on the first Sunday of every month. Also to stay in one of the pretty cottages.



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