

kitchen spy

pete barrett

Australia's most high-profile garden designer has been chasing the rural life since he was eight, growing vegetables and tending to goats at his childhood home in what was then bucolic Melbourne suburb Vermont. Vermont has a McDonald's now and Bangay, 50, has moved to Stonefields, a stunning house and garden set on 40 hectares in Victoria's central highlands. He has a "little house" in Melbourne and an apartment in Sydney but this is home, which he shares with partner Barry McNeill, two labradors, Devon and Timber, 17 British White cows, "about 30" Barred Plymouth Rock chooks and at least one lettuce-thieving wallaby.



The staples

My pantry I have porridge with oats for breakfast and add currants or dried fruit. We use a lot of Mount Zero extra virgin olive oil but we grow all our own veggies. In summer we do a lot of salads and I always use Maggie Beer's verjuice in my salad dressing. We've got tomatoes, beans, leeks, pumpkin, potatoes - but a wallaby got in and ate all the lettuces. We also use a lot of basil, thyme and rosemary from the herb garden.

My fridge The fridge is full of my bulbs. You've got to bring them down to one or two degrees for five or six weeks before you plant them - it makes them flower better.

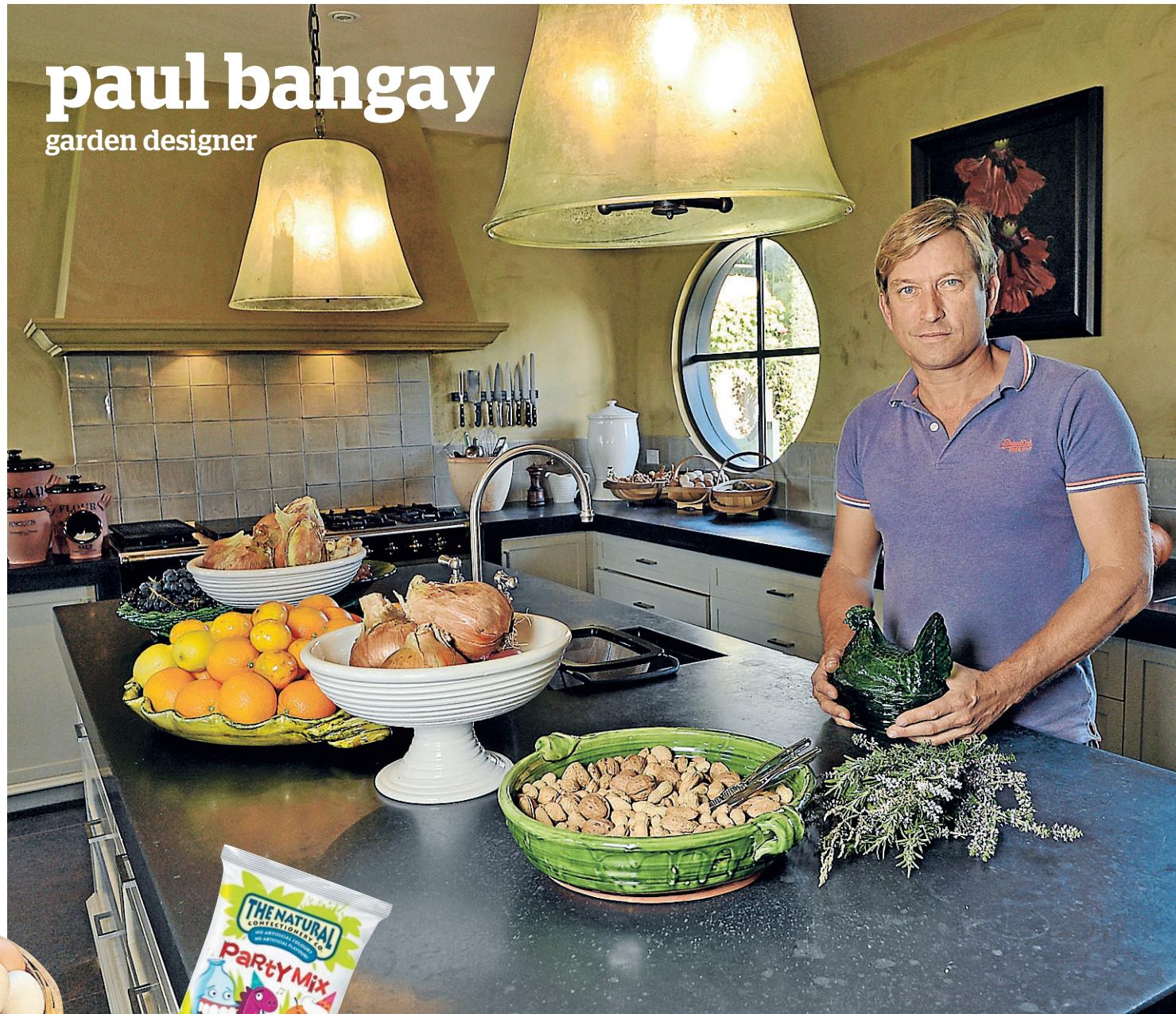
These Ronaldo bulbs are a deep red. I'm not sure about this butter, Barry bought it.



For the first time in his career Bangay has designed a show garden for the Melbourne International Flower and Garden Show, which opens in Carlton Gardens tomorrow. See melbflowershow.com.au.

paul bangay

garden designer



Photos: Michael Clayton-Jones



Secret vice

I'm addicted to lollies. You know those Natural Confectionery ones? The party blend. That's bad, isn't it?

Most unforgettable meal

I had a whole lot of friends here for no particular occasion and my friend Stephanie Alexander had agreed to come and cook for me. It was just incredible.

My inspiration

We get a lot of inspiration from the garden. It's what is in season, whatever is pickable in the garden at that time. We have 12 plots in a space about 15 by 20 metres. My favourite crop are the asparagus. You pick it from October to December and then let it go to leaf. The thing about asparagus is the bed lasts forever.

Food discovery

I'm a bit obsessed with elderflowers, we've got a lot growing wild by the roads around here. We make an elderflower cordial with them. You just soak them overnight in a bucket of water and lemon juice, strain them through muslin and then boil the mixture up with some sugar.



Last night's dinner

We had perch from Prahran Market and salad from the garden. I used lemon juice, a little bit of salt, a little thyme from the garden, wrapped it in foil and put it in the oven for 15 minutes. It was so good.



Recipe stalwart

It's what I'm known for, my sponge. I could never get Stephanie Alexander's recipe right and then she said to me, "it's all about the cake tin size". So I found this one at Coles and all of a sudden, it just rose, it was beautiful.

My tool kit

We've got two dishwashers (Bosch). You end up doing so much entertaining in the country so there's always a pile of dishes. We had a Miele oven in the old house in Woodend but our designer (the late Stuart Rattle) convinced me to get the big Lacanche. It's great. It's got so many hotplates plus a convection oven and a fan-forced oven, so you can cook cakes in one and roasts in the other. Oh, and we're obsessed with green china.



Favourite

My grandmother's green chicken butter dish. I really model myself on Gladys, my father's mother, she was just the best cook. She always had a wood-fired Aga and I can always remember as a kid she was cooking all the time - lovely roasts and puddings, real country cooking. Someone nearly smashed it once so I don't use it that much now, just for special occasions.



I'm drinking

My favourite drink is St Germain Elderflower liqueur, on ice. I have a flat white in the morning and I love lemon verbena tea. I just pick the leaves, crush them up in my hands and put them in hot water. Otherwise, I like wine, mostly light French reds. If I taste a delicious wine in a restaurant I use an app called Red Laser to scan the bar code. I use that all the time.