

From Silicon Valley to the food capital

LUNCH WITH...

CHRIS LUCAS

The prolific restaurateur tells **Peter Barrett** about his unlikely career path.

It's Tuesday, and an hour before meeting up with restaurateur Chris Lucas for lunch at one of his nine venues, Lillian Brasserie, I send a text reminding him that *The Age* insists on picking up the tab. "No issue," he fires back, "we need the income lol [laughing crying emoji]."

It's funny because it's the first time anyone has ever bought him lunch at his own restaurant, but it's also on point for Lucas, a highly ambitious operator who is rumoured to have spent \$15 million on what he later calls "probably the most significant [food & beverage] development of its time in Australian history", his three-restaurant complex at 80 Collins Street.

The "we" in his response could easily mean the hospitality sector at large, too. Lucas has recently been a strident critic in the media of Victorian government lockdowns and their effect on small business.

When Lucas arrives he is looking smart but casual in his signature navy sports jacket and T-shirt. The diners opposite greet him warmly as he sits down at our elegant brown leather booth. Soon after, Penfolds chief winemaker Peter Gago drops by to say hello, leaving us both with a (delicious)

2002 Cellar Reserve Barossa Valley Grenache sample to remember him by.

Lucas takes interruptions like these in his stride. The restaurant floor may not be his office, but clearly it's his stage. He's had a hand in pretty much every design detail surrounding us, from the delicate, Austrian hand-blown glassware to the handmade-in-Melbourne timber table we're about to eat lunch from.

"I'm a restaurateur that has his fingers in all the pies literally, excuse the pun," he says. "There's not a dish that doesn't go on my menus that I don't approve or taste... sometimes I write the menus myself." On that note, I take his advice and settle on a couple of char-grilled king prawns followed by the King George whiting. Lucas opts for kingfish and a Nicoise salad for mains.

While Lucas may still be best known for his 2011 game-changing, no-bookings Thai triumph in Flinders Lane, Chin Chin, he has steadily been opening venues ever since – think Baby, Hawker Hall, Kisume and Chin Chin (Sydney). Lillian, where we meet today, is one of four restaurants Lucas opened during the pandemic.

If you haven't heard of it, say the critics, it's because it's been



For Chris Lucas the restaurant floor may not be his office, but clearly it's his stage; Nicoise salad; crumbed King George whiting. Photos: Joe Armao

overshadowed by its much-hyped sibling, Society.

Widely considered a coup for Melbourne, in 2018 Lucas was able to lure hospitality power couple Martin Benn (chef) and Vicki Wild (front of house) to leave Sydney and collaborate with him on this ambitious and luxurious fine dining restaurant. Lockdowns delayed Society's opening by a year and, when it finally did open its doors in 2021, another had them shut within days. Benn and Wild walked away from the project around the same time and have not said much publicly about why.

"The lockdowns had an effect on them as well," says Lucas. "It was traumatic, and nothing was normalised. I don't hold anyone to

account. People did what they had to do."

With 500 staff at 80 Collins Street (including Society, Lillian and buzzy downstairs Japanese grill Yakimono) and nearly 1500 more at his other venues (Flinders Lane steakhouse Grill Americano opened in March), Lucas says over the past two pandemic years he often felt like the captain of a struggling ship. He organised daily free meals for staff who needed them, employed two psychologists and paid the equivalent of JobKeeper to 120 foreign workers who didn't qualify for government support.

"I felt a deep sense of obligation to people and that's why under no circumstances could I accept losing any staff. Yes, we pivoted to takeaway,

Why the 'Wagatha Christie' trial has proven

Rob Harris
Europe correspondent

Forget *Bridgerton* or *The Crown*. The real-life feud between two WAGs – wives and girlfriends of England football stars – is the only British drama captivating a nation right now.

Two-and-a-half years after Coleen Rooney, the wife of legendary Manchester United striker Wayne, accused her former friend Rebekah Vardy of being the source of several stories about her in the British press, the highly anticipated "Wagatha Christie" libel trial came to a close on Thursday at London's Royal Courts of Justice.

For seven days, the Rooneys and the Vardys swapped Wembley for the front row of Court 13 as Justice Karen Steyn heard accusations of planting gossip in the press, lost evidence, who unfollowed whom on Instagram, and – unexpectedly – the size of Australian pop star Peter Andre's manhood. It has pushed the

recent soap opera of the royal family off the front pages.

The trial has switched from drama to comedy in the blink of an eye, mainly courtesy of the sharp-tongued cross-examination from Rooney's barrister David Sherborne, once nicknamed "Orange Sherbert" because of his "boyish, tanned" golden glow with a "metropolitan bouffant of hair".

On her third day in the witness box, Vardy, wearing a vintage Chanel dress, huge cat-eye sunglasses and her hair wound in a tight bun, lost her cool and was twice reduced to tears.

Vardy has been accused of destroying incriminating evidence by deleting text messages and lying about it under oath. The strange disappearance of the mobile phone belonging to her former agent Caroline Watt, allegedly accidentally dropped from a boat into the North Sea during a trip to Scotland last year, has also lent great intrigue.

But one message did survive to present to the court, a vital conversation



Coleen Rooney arrives with her husband Wayne. Photos: Getty Images

where Vardy and Watt discussed Rooney's fears on Twitter that she had been betrayed by someone she trusted. Watt said to her client: "It wasn't someone she trusted. It was me."

Rooney's defence says it is "common sense" Vardy knew her agent was leaking information to *The Sun*, even if "she was not the one that pulled the

trigger". Watt was ruled unfit to give oral evidence at the trial by a consultant forensic psychiatrist because of her fragile mental health.

When it emerged that WhatsApp messages from Watt's phone at the time were lost at the bottom of the ocean, Sherborne lamented that the evidence needed now lay "in Davy Jones' locker". The court erupted when Vardy responded: "I'm sorry, I don't know who Davy Jones is." The judge then told her the reference was a figure of speech which "just means the bottom of the sea".

It should have never really got this far, but both sides have deep pockets and damaged pride. After a lengthy and failed mediation, the saga has cost an estimated £3 million (\$5.3 million) as the pair indulged in the best libel lawyers money can buy.

The case hinges on a social media post by Rooney in October 2019. Coleen, who at that point had been married to Wayne for 11 years, was devoting most of her



SOCIETY	
THE INVOICE	
TABLE ACCOUNT NO. 1234567890	
Served by Mr. Bob - 1234567890	
Chairs: 12	
2024/05/21 at 12:30 PM	
Beverage - Glass of	\$12.00
Food - Dinner	\$127.00
Tax	\$12.00
6 x 200ml	
1 x 200ml	\$12.00
1 x 200ml	\$12.00
1 x 200ml	\$12.00
1 x 200ml	\$12.00
1 x 200ml	\$12.00
Total	\$217.00
Balance	\$217.00

THE BILL

Lillian Brasserie,
80 Collins Street,
Melbourne Vic
3000, (03)
8618 8900,
open for lunch
and dinner
12-10pm, seven
days a week.

is never far away by the way his eyes light up talking about innovations in genomics. “We are literally in the throes of curing a lot of very major long-term diseases like Alzheimer’s, hopefully MND, certainly lots of different cancers,” he says, “through the mapping of the human genome.”

After uni, computer behemoth IBM snapped him up and he spent several years working in marketing and IT. He lived and worked a stint in Silicon Valley (Steve Jobs is an idol) and later made a fortune from a telecommuni-

cations start-up. It wasn’t until his mid-40s, in 1995, that he returned to hospitality, opening up Number One Fitzroy Street in St Kilda. The Botanical in South Yarra was next, which he sold in 2007 for a reported \$16 million. Many restaurants have followed, and another Melbourne venue is in the planning stages even as you read this. It prompts the question: why so many?

“When you’re a creative person, there’s no off switch,” he says. “You know, I don’t even understand the concept of retirement. My father died on the job. I don’t want to use the nasty word – Rupert Murdoch – but he’s 90 years of age and he’s still going. Bob Hawke was still going at 70 years of age ... If you look in the creative sphere, for instance, Spielberg is 70-something and still making amazing movies.” But given how slim restaurant

margins already are, and how precarious the hospitality industry has shown itself to be, isn’t there a danger his creative drive will ultimately end in financial ruin?

“Risk is built into a restaurateur’s life,” says Lucas. “We probably take more risks in business than anyone else – with the exception of people in the movie or the theatre business.”

The theatre analogy is interesting. Lucas may be a savvy businessman but he delights in the effect a well-designed experience can have on a customer, as a director might seeing their film become a box-office smash. You also get the sense Lucas enjoys the minor celebrity status that comes with being a cultural influencer. He rubs shoulders with a coterie of interesting, wealthy and powerful people every day.

Outside the restaurant world, he has two hobbies: fishing (whiting and snapper in Port Phillip Bay) and reading (he has subscriptions to *The New York Times* and *The Economist* and is enjoying a book about Stephen A. Schwartzman, the CEO and co-founder

‘When you’re a creative person, there’s no off switch.’

Chris Lucas

of US investment giant Blackstone). He is a passionate wine collector (a 1961 Chateau Latour magnum “worth \$30 or \$40 grand” takes pride of place in his cellar) and later in the week he’ll be travelling to Burgundy and Bordeaux with his fiancée, Sarah Lew, to visit suppliers and take a much-needed rest from business.

As we wind up our chat, Lucas is upbeat about Melbourne’s future. The crowds are back at the footy, he’s excited about the recent announcement of a new contemporary art gallery and he’s confident the city’s CBD will thrive once more, if it can entice more people to live here.

“I love this city. Nothing excites Melburnians more than a new restaurant, and to be able to go out to four new restaurants – it’s inspiring, I hope, other people in the industry to rebuild, reopen and do new things.”

but we also, I think, went from being a restaurant business [to] sort of like a ... multifaceted psychologist/social services business. Sixty per cent of the time we were dealing with human issues.”

On Melbourne hospitality’s nadir — a lockdown called just before Valentine’s Day in 2021 — Lucas says the local industry threw out \$30 million in food. The stakes were high personally (the pandemic has cost him “millions”, he says) and for the wider industry, which explains why he appointed himself unofficial spokesperson for hospitality and small business in the media.

Isn’t there a danger, though, given the political divisions swirling around at the time, that some potential

customers might have been left with a bad taste in their mouth?

“I think in life you’ve got to believe sometimes in things, and you’ve got to take a stand,” he says. “And you’ve got to cop the criticism that comes with it. I was prepared to do that because I was witnessing firsthand the destruction of everything that I knew near and dear.”

Lucas caught the hospitality bug growing up in a hotel run by his Greek immigrant father Con in Geelong. But his dad’s death when Lucas was only 15 set him on a different path. Honouring his late father’s wishes he went to Monash University, graduating with a science degree and majoring in pharmacology.

You can tell that his love for science

to be Britain’s biggest celebrity squabble

time to bringing up their four boys, Kai, Klay, Kit and Cass. She’d grown increasingly suspicious about who’d been providing Fleet Street with stories about her.

Rooney had an idea of who might be responsible for the leaks, discussed it with other WAGs, and then set a trap. She posted three false stories about herself, including one claiming she’d visited a “gender-selection clinic” in Mexico to ensure she became pregnant with a girl. She altered her privacy settings, so only Vardy’s account would see the posts. When these appeared in print, Rooney decided she had her proof.

“I have saved and screenshotted all the original stories which clearly show just one person has viewed them,” she wrote on social media. “It’s ... Rebekah Vardy’s account.”

The sensational allegation and sting earned her the moniker “Wagatha Christie” – a tribute to the best-selling British creator of fictional supersleuths Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot.

Vardy immediately denied the allegations and hit back on social media: “I wish you had called me if you thought this. I never speak to anyone about you, as various journalists who have asked me to over the years can vouch for ... I’m not being funny but I don’t need the money, what would I gain from selling stories on you?” We now know that at the same time she sent a text to Watt, declaring: “That’s war.”

Vardy formally issued a writ for libel about six months later, with her lawyers objecting to the inference in Rooney’s post that their client “has consistently and repeatedly betrayed [Rooney’s] trust over several years by leaking the defendant’s private and personal Instagram posts and stories for publication in *The Sun*”.

Attempts to broker a peace followed, but neither woman would back down.

Vardy, 40, was working as a nightclub promoter when she met her future footballer husband. She cashed in after he helped Leicester City to its unlikely



Rebekah Vardy leaves the Royal Courts of Justice this week.

suffered from “constant anxiety” and “panic attacks”. At one stage she said she’d found the long process of giving evidence against her fellow WAG “exhausting and intimidating”, adding: “I feel I have been bullied and manipulated.”

While Vardy brought the action, the case has been bruising for her

Premier League title six years ago by appearing on *I’m A Celebrity* and *Dancing On Ice* as well as becoming a regular on daytime chat television.

She became emotional when she told the court she “didn’t do anything wrong” and wanted to clear her name, saying she had

reputation, with messages produced showing she tipped off journalists through Watt to in-fighting within her husband’s teams, leaked stories on other WAGs and alerted photographers to their whereabouts during the World Cup.

Hugh Tomlinson, QC, Vardy’s barrister, told the court in his closing submission his client “does not know to this day” who leaked the stories, but accepted that “the obvious suspect is Caroline Watt”.

“She does not want to be in the position of accusing her friend and former long-time agent of doing something wrong. Throughout this case, [Vardy] has sought to find out the position. The very first thing she said to Mrs Rooney was ‘send me the evidence, send me the posts’.”

The trial had no jury, which liberated the 12 seats of the jury box for journalists covering the case. It is now up to Steyn to decide who picks up the terrifying bill in the weeks to come.