



Captions: Arman Uz is passionate about good food and fresh produce. At Flanagans Dining Room the menu changes daily depending on what fish was caught the night before. Perfectly presented; a simple but delicious seafood meal typical of Arman's creations.



Seafood by the seaside

WITH A STRAIGHTFORWARD FOOD PHILOSOPHY OF CASUAL, SIMPLE, FRESH, ARMAN
UZ HAS TAKEN THE QUINTESSENTIAL AUSSIE FISH & CHIPS TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL.



“I LIKE TO WATCH THEIR
FACES WHEN THEY TAKE
THE FIRST BITE, TO SEE
THE REACTION, THE
FACIAL EXPRESSION, THE
BODY LANGUAGE.”

It's a hot day, perhaps the hottest October day on record with temperatures soaring towards 38 degrees C. Thirroul Beach is boasting its characteristic powder blue, open ocean façade for which the Coalcliff coast is famous. Those brave enough to be outside are cooling off in the gentle shore-breakers, or hiding in any tiny piece of shade they can find. It's nearly easy to miss Flanagans Dining Room as you walk past the playground, then the Olympic swimming pool entrance. But suddenly there it is, in the original beach kiosk building, unassuming but inviting. And there to welcome you is Arman Uz, smiling and unflustered, despite the intense heat.

Stepping into Flanagans is like breezing into a favourite cosy beach-house. The décor is simple – a theme that is extended to other areas of the restaurant as well – yet elegant. The views, however, are truly spectacular. So much so that it is hard to tear your eyes away. And the freshness of the ocean with its salted, airy breath washes through the open windows making it impossible to forget where you are.

This is chef Arman Uz's latest challenge – to convert a suburban fish and chips café into a good seafood restaurant. “When I first saw the place, I saw the potential,” he says. “Before, it was more of a café, a kiosk, whereas now we have created a really unique dining experience. We were recently named by the Good Food Guide as one of the top three restaurants in the Illawarra.”

In Flanagans, Arman has been afforded the flexibility and creativity to develop his distinctive style of cuisine. Casual, simple, nothing too fancy, but fresh, high-quality ingredients mixed with just the right spices. Good, honest food.

“I create dishes,” says Arman “I have a Turkish background and have worked with chefs from all around the world. I grew up with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cuisine. I know flavours and I like my spices.”

Arman shops daily at the Shellharbour Fish Markets, waking early to see what treasures the local fishermen have caught that day. “I always look for fresh local fish – wild fish. Today I bought red fish, wrasse, boar fish (which is also called duck fish) and snapper. I had never heard of boar fish before. I am always learning.”



The philosophy is to showcase local fresh seasonal produce, simply done with a mixture of tradition and a modern twist. In the kitchen Arman does create. "I like to use fish that are unique, that people haven't tried before, or don't typically cook at home." The menu is changed daily and depends largely on what fish and produce is available.

"This job is a passion for me. Good food is important." Arman says "I aim for fresh and simple, a combination of good flavours, always pushing the limits; but I don't do anything crazy to impress people."

But people do seem impressed. In the year since Flanagans introduced their seven-course degustation menu on Friday and Saturday nights, the restaurant has become popular with locals and visitors to the area. Saturday nights are usually fully booked and Fridays are heading that way. At Sunday lunch they easily serve 100 people in the two-hour time slot. And with 1000 followers on their Facebook page, the feedback is that what they are doing is working.

"I put my food on the plate. I know what everyone else is doing, and who does what well, but my food is a reflection of me. My trick is to use Turkish or Middle Eastern flavours but to modernise it with local produce."

At Flanagans, Arman is a bit of a one-man show, doing everything in the kitchen himself, although recently he has taken on a third-year apprentice. Although he doesn't profess to be a dessert or pastry chef, his desserts have become popular. "People love my desserts, sometimes more than my food." This is clearly something he finds both interesting and amusing. "We ask people what their favourite dish was, and they say 'the dessert'. I think it is the Middle Eastern touch that makes the difference. It's a bit different to what people are expecting, and they like it."

Presentation is important and is about balance – a good mixture of everything working together to make the whole dining experience worthwhile and one to be remembered. "I like to watch their faces when they take the first bite, to see the reaction, the facial expression, the body language." If something is not right, he asks the wait staff to check. "I do watch. They don't know. Afterwards people shake my hand. I like people to leave happy and satisfied." ■

From left to right: Chef Arman Uz has a distinctive approach that is gaining Flanagans a large and loyal following and rave reviews from far and wide. Not your typical meal of fish and chips. The dining room is so close to the ocean you can taste the salt from the sea mist.