

# XL

EXTRAORDINARY LIVES

## SUCCESS STORY

Paul Dunn  
The Wizard of WOW!

## CONTRIBUTION

Every Child Counts

## EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES

Off-Road in Mud  
in Malaysia

# REVOLUTIONISING Peter Knipp

Singapore S\$8  
New Zealand NZ\$8  
Hong Kong HK\$35  
Malaysia RM16  
Australia A\$8  
Thailand B180  
Indonesia RP20,000



Though it was Voltaire who wrote, "Appreciation is a wonderful thing: it makes what is excellent in others belong to us as well," it is Peter Knipp who has helped Singaporeans appreciate their own culinary excellence, while bringing the best of the world's cuisine to Singapore where they have been making it their own, writes Floyd Cowan.

Photos by MUHAMAD AZLIN

When Peter Knipp and his wife Siu Bee recently celebrated their 25th anniversary, Siu Bee told Peter, "We've been together for 25 years, but I've only known you for five." This was not only an ironic statement, as Peter is very high profile in Singapore and there are probably many people who feel as if they've known him for decades, though the reality may be just a few years — but it also spurred him into a revolutionary lifestyle change.

Peter has gone through revolutionary changes in his life before, such as when he left the security of his job at the Raffles Hotel to the insecurity of launching his own company; and through the strength of his personality he has undoubtedly caused revolutions in the lives of other people. He has certainly been a revolutionary force in Singapore's culinary scene.

## Making Things Happen

At the top of the profile he has for publicity purposes, it states, "There are three types of people: people who watch things happen, people who wonder what happened, and those who make it happen." Peter is definitely one of those who makes things happen. He is seldom happy doing one thing at a time and finds it impossible to do nothing — even when he does take a sabbatical from it all, as Siu Bee's comment inspired him to do.

In the middle of his five-week break, in addition to giving press interviews, he has totally reorganised the kitchen which, if it looked as immaculate as the rest of his home, probably didn't need reorganising. During the photo shoot, I suggest we take some pictures in his office at home. "No," he responds, "there are papers all over the place in there." Undoubtedly he's doing some work in there as well.

"You are a very intense person, Peter," Siu Bee tells him over a glass of champagne. "You are always on the go, you are always doing something. That is why I say I've only known you for five years."

"But you are the same way," he responds. "You are very independent, you have a commitment to work, you are always on the go — that's why I married you." Siu Bee, in addition to being the mother of Wolfram, who is 22 and is

the Network Specialist at his parent's company, and 14-year-old Wolfhart, she is a director at Peter Knipp Holdings and has the same direct style that her husband is famous for.

## Dishing it Out

"I dish it out," he says, and there are few people who would disagree with him. "I believe in honesty and integrity. You speak what you believe, you stand up for what you believe and you live up to your mistakes. When I've done something wrong, I say 'guilty as charged.' I am honest about what I can do and what I can't do." The German-born entrepreneur continues, "I have had more impact on people than some people realize. They may not always appreciate it at the time, but years later they will tell me, 'you taught me so much'."

## In the World's Famous Kitchens

In addition to Bytes Asia, Peter Knipp Holdings has 30 employees in five divisions: Communications (Peter Knipp Holdings started as a publication company and now publishes the high quality bi-monthly magazine *Cuisine&Wine Asia*), IT, providing IT solutions; and with its own website [www.asiacuisine.com](http://www.asiacuisine.com) which has won a slew of awards, Kitchen Design; Food & Beverage Concept Development; and Events Management. However, Peter's pride and joy is the award-winning World Gourmet Summit which along with the Singapore Tourism Board, he developed in 1996 and launched in 1997. "The real strength of the company," Peter notes, "is Francis Poulouse, my General Manager, and his entire team. They really make things happen."

Peter is not only direct and honest, he is a perfectionist, and it is a trait that he probably had from before he began his ascent in the culinary world as a chef apprentice at the Berlin Hilton at 17. He worked his way through famous kitchens in Switzerland, Canada and New York before arriving in Asia more than 25 years ago. From Taiwan, to Hong Kong, to Thailand and China, he began his Asian experience, (which he had longed for from a very young age) before ending up at the Raffles

# Peter Knipp

COVER STORY

On a five week sabbatical, Peter took time to catch up on some reading

## COVER STORY

culinary ambassadors's, while most of them really get an incentive to excel when they enter the profession. They have been with people who have a passion for what they do, and they work to a very high level simply because they love what they are doing. A love and a passion for what you are doing is the basis for creating quality chefs, quality service and a quality dining experience."

Not surprisingly, when you understand the personal revolution Peter is going through (he has lost 17 kilos as during his break he hits the gym four times a week and goes bike riding on Sundays), he says that the 2007 WGS will have a makeover. "It is going to be rejuvenated. For instance, the guest chefs will be showcased at the beginning and the end of the event." And the beginning and the end will be further apart, spread over 18 days. Peter holds up a calendar with the impressive number of events highlighted. "There will be more events, but as we've added more days there will be less events per day, which will make it easier for more people to attend more events."

### Signs of Success

Singapore's World Gourmet Summit has inspired similar events to be held elsewhere in the region — one sure sign of success. How does Peter assess the impact of WGS as it enters its 11th year?

"Has WGS been a success?" he muses, swirling a glass of Schloos Johannisberger 2004 Riesling Kabinett. "Well, when we started, there were only three culinary schools in Singapore — now there are 18 or 20. Ten years ago, for most Singaporeans, the kitchen was the domain of the maid, but it has now become a central part of many homes. I know of multi-million dollar homes that have three kitchens — each for different occasions. More people are travelling overseas so they can experience in the home country the food that they first tried at WGS. There are more restaurants and a greater variety of quality fine-dining venues. This hasn't all been because of WGS, but we've been a part of it."

WGS has been a tremendous success that has grown better each year with new innovations, and by improving on the successes and failures of each year — and there have been some disasters.

"At the first WGS, we had 10 chefs prepare the gala dinner," Peter relates. "It really was a case of too many chefs; it was the most forgettable gala dinner we've ever had." He smiles, "Some of these characters need to be dealt with. They are Uniquely Chefs. You see humanity at its best and its worst. There was the time we had animal rights protesters because we were serving foie gras — but that resulted in our best ticket sales."

### Never Say Die, Never Say SARS

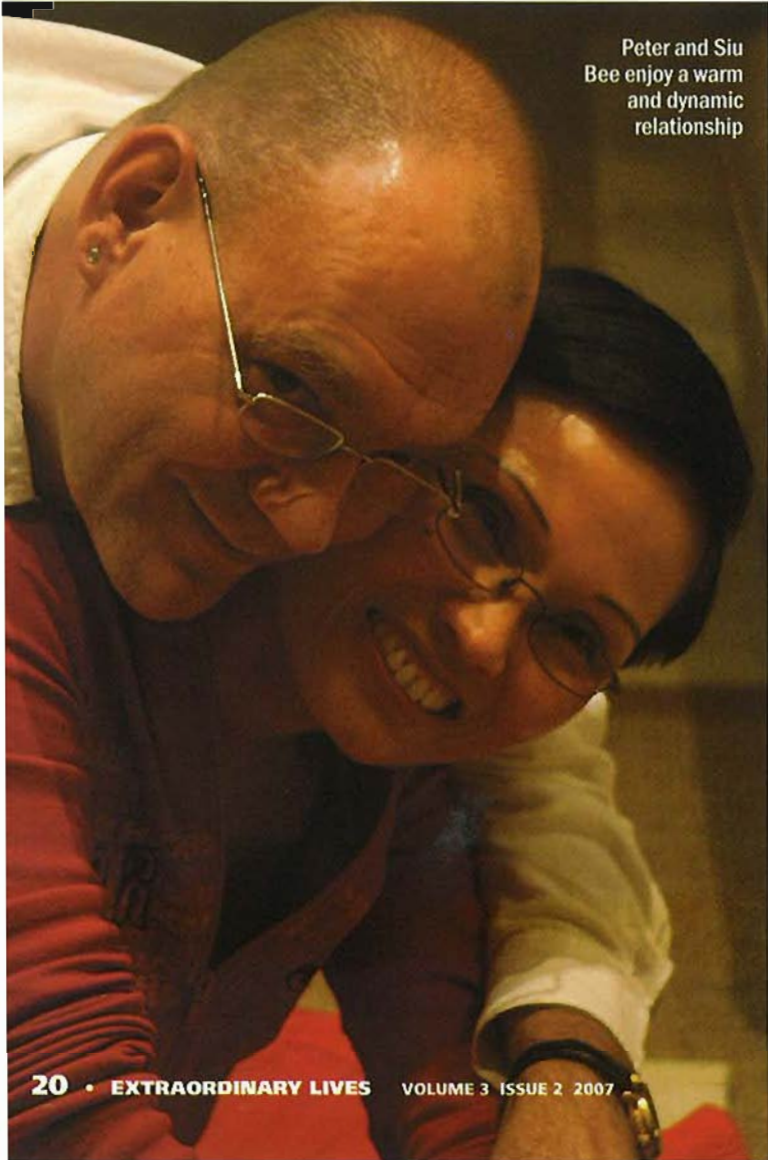
It hasn't always been easy. "We've had some great parties, some tremendous dinners, and the opportunity to meet and work with the top people in this industry in the world has been a wonderful experience. But there have been difficulties, such as the year we were hit by SARS."

Not matter what the difficulty, Peter's attitude always remains to "never give up and never say die." He persists until he gets the job done.

The goal with WGS has always been to show to the world what Singapore is capable of — but that doesn't mean that Peter is simply a cheerleader for the city. He is perhaps the harshest critic of the dining scene here, and he airs his opinions openly and publicly. In the January issue of *Cuisine&Wine Asia*, he writes in his editorial 'from the publisher': "If we compare Hong Kong and Singapore (my old and favourite topic), one thing becomes very apparent. Singapore is obsessed with trends: so much so that identity, quality and service suffer. In Hong Kong, on the other hand (yes, it has trendy restaurants aplenty), quality and service desire rule. We have great chefs in Singapore, but Hong Kong seems to have the greater number of good restaurants."

One of the pleasures of a sabbatical is the opportunity to read, and Peter has been delving into the classics from Hemingway, to Tolstoy and Voltaire, while no doubt listening to the classics of Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones. In his reading of Voltaire he may have come across the famous quote from the French writer, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him."

If Peter Knipp did not exist, it would be impossible to invent him. **XI**



Peter and Siu Bee enjoy a warm and dynamic relationship

dining experiences. The Awards have also encouraged more players to break new ground and help entrench Singapore as a gourmet capital.

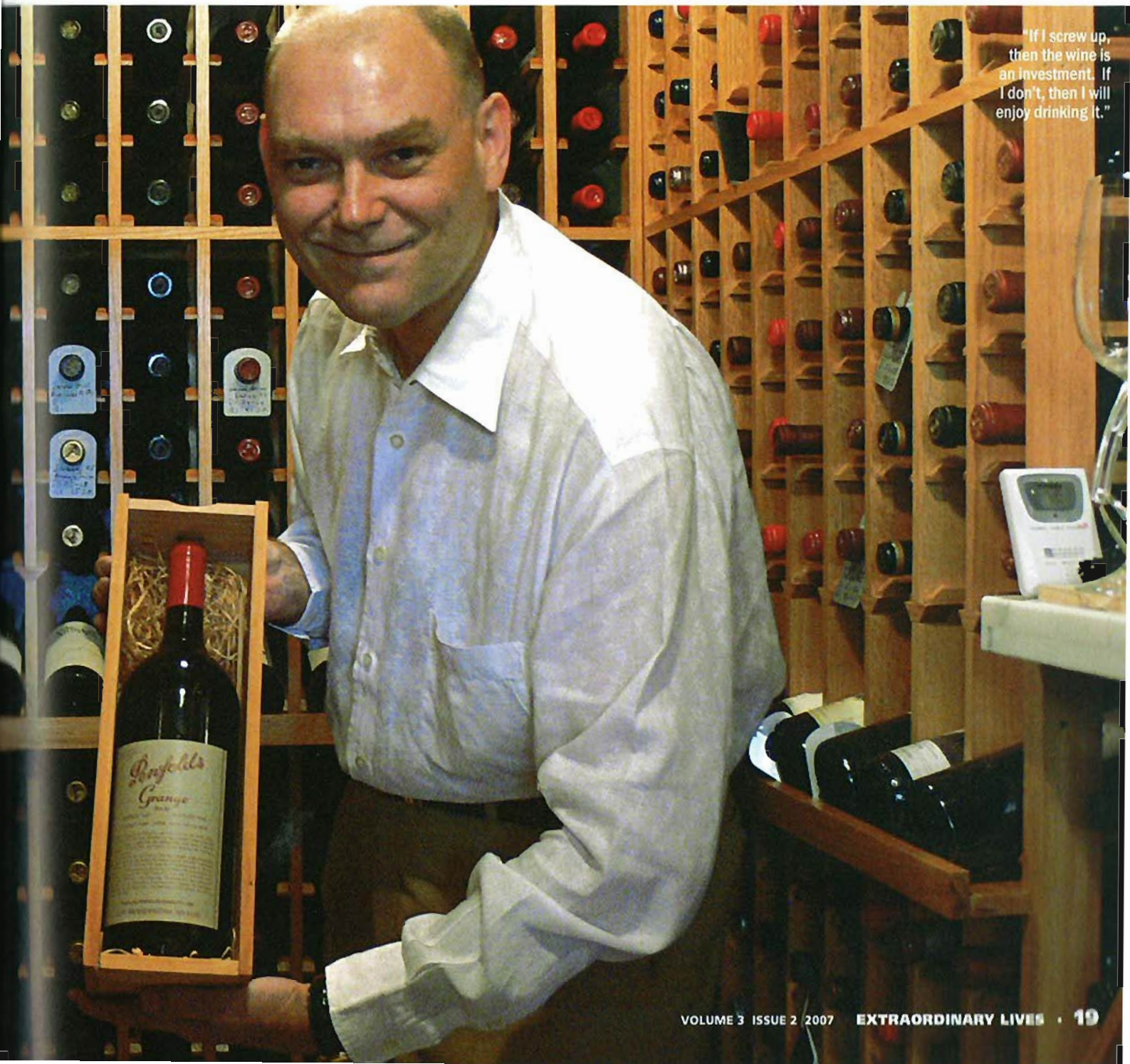
"They are totally unbiased," Peter points out. "Peers, suppliers, gourmards, people who love food, vote on the awards. There is sufficient volume that it provides a good balance of opinion and I believe it really reflects the truth. Nobody gets an award because they've placed an ad or sponsored some event. And it is not a popularity contest, but it reflects who is truly the best at what they are doing. Our experience over the years has proven this out."

## Now they Understand

Almost every year something new is added to WGS, and about five years ago the Awards of Excellence added three scholarships that are given to aspiring food-and-

beverage talents who have the potential to excel in the F&B profession. The scholarships are open to people in the industry, or are studying to enter it and are between ages 18 and 26. One recipient has the opportunity to attend a culinary course at a prestigious culinary institute, while another goes to a winery to learn about such things as viticulture, yeast study and wine making. The patisserie scholarship winner has the opportunity to attend a patisserie course at a prestigious patisserie institution in Europe.

"The purpose of the scholarships," Peter explains, "is to expose these young people to what life is like outside our environment. We find that when they come back they are more open to the world, they have a better understanding of it. Some leave Singapore because now they understand the potential of what is out there, becoming great Singapore 'cultural and



"If I screw up, then the wine is an investment. If I don't, then I will enjoy drinking it."

## COVER STORY

Hotel as Executive Chef. The bearded, Harley-Davidson-riding chef quickly began to build a reputation in a city where being different is seldom encouraged.

"I always wanted to live in Asia," the Berliner states. "I come from a very humble background and I can always remember wanting to travel. I lived in Canada and Switzerland, and I didn't like the weather and the mindset of the people at that time there. I came to Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore prior to moving to Taiwan and immediately liked what I saw in the culture. It was the same in Hong Kong and China, they are very rich cultures. Singapore is amazing, though sometimes I feel it is too westernised. But it is so fantastic here. Where else can you find such cultural diversity? We should be celebrating this. It is so fascinating, and we should be showcasing the multi-culinary experience to the world."

### The World Gourmet Summit is Born

Showcasing Singapore's culinary diversity is only one reason that Peter launched the World Gourmet Summit. "It started as an accident," he says. "In 1996 I was at a gourmet festival in San Moritz, representing the Raffles Hotel, when I met Dr Tan Chin Nam, who was Chief Executive of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB). (He is now Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, and Chairman of the Media Development Authority, Singapore). We talked for an hour and a half, and WGS was born."

As a professional chef who had worked at the renowned Raffles Hotel, Peter was somewhat frustrated by the image that Singapore projected to the world. "When I worked at Raffles, people who were coming to stay with us would send a fax asking questions like, 'Do you have refrigeration? do cooks wear shoes? does anyone speak English?' Singapore was always known for its local food but not for the high-end cuisine. Few people understood Singapore, and this upset me, as we did have fine dining restaurants with very high standards for that time."

Dr Tan and Peter Knipp agreed, it was time to promote Singapore's culinary diversity. They planned a tourism-oriented programme that would not only showcase Singapore's food, wine and service to the world, but would bring the world's gastronomy to Singapore.

"We wanted to establish Singapore as a high-end destination where you could get everything from satay to the finest foie gras, from local seabass to the best imported fish. We have a very versatile culture and we wanted the world to know about it. What people also didn't know is that we had some of the most knowledgeable wine collectors in the world with some of the finest collections."

### Raising the Bar

Peter wanted to raise the bar – something he still strives to do. "We thought that one way of improving the quality of food and service in Singapore was to bring the world's top chefs here, and not simply to cook

for the people, but to meet with them and share their experiences and knowledge.

"Some people still don't get it," he rolls his eyes, purses his lips and shakes his head (classic Knipp mannerisms). "I had people ask why we didn't do the Sunday brunch the same way they do it in their hotel. 'Why do we have to sit with the chefs?' they ask. That's the whole point! To get to know and meet the best chefs in the world. Not just to see them, but to communicate with them and exchange ideas and experiences."

A point that people do get are the Awards of Excellence. Inspired by the Michelin in France and the James Beard Foundation in the United States, the Awards of Excellence pay tribute to individuals and organisations that have made significant contributions to the F&B industry through their service excellence, creativity and commitment to providing world-class

