

# fine food & fanfare

Former *Highlife* food writer Vanessa Harcourt has built a stellar career, holding head roles in top restaurants, working as Alan Jones' personal chef, and becoming executive chef at NSW Parliament House. She tells MELISSA PENN how her experiences at Parliament House led to a book on the building's colourful dining history – and she shares recipes on page 110.



VANESSA HARCOURT IN NSW PARLIAMENT HOUSE STRANGERS' RESTAURANT, WITH FAHY BOTTRELL'S CITY TREE TAPESTRY (PHOTOGRAPH ANSON SMART © NSW PARLIAMENT)

**A**S EXECUTIVE CHEF at NSW Parliament House over five years, Vanessa Harcourt has run two kitchens, overseen nine dining and event spaces, and served more than 100,000 meals annually to dignitaries, MPs and members of the public. But in 2020, when Covid lockdowns meant her staff faced losing their livelihoods, Vanessa also became the driving force behind a new book, *Dining at New South Wales Parliament*, which pays tribute to the food, art and history of Australia's first parliament.

"Many of our staff were casual or agency or on international visas – so they were going to be pretty much destitute if they didn't work," says Vanessa, 42, who lives in Moss Vale (she is currently on 12 months leave from her position).

"For a while I'd been thinking, 'We cater for all these special events at Parliament House, yet nothing is being documented and people don't know about them'. There are beautiful collections of china that get brought out then packed away. I thought it was a great opportunity to let the public know we do more than roast beef and gravy."

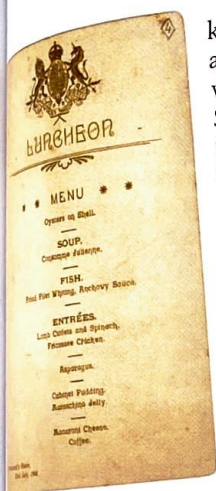


Every one of the book's 53 recipes was tested by staff at home in their kitchens. "We wanted ways to engage the chefs in meaningful work, which included testing recipes at home," says Vanessa, who also initiated "flipping" the Parliament kitchens to support OzHarvest and other food charities during Covid. Between 2020 and 2022, the team provided 800 meals a day to 200 homeless and domestic violence shelters around Sydney.

To start on the book, which includes the history of dining and notable occasions at NSW Parliament House, Vanessa began by "annoying everybody in Parliament, from the Hansard writers to the people who look after the collection of china and artefacts. I worked with Parliament's collections and heritage historians/writers. Wes Stowe collected the old menus and Brittany Allen is meticulous about facts." Among the historical menus is one from 1894 from the parliamentary refreshment room showing calf's head and brain sauce, and a buffet lunch from 1983 for Princess Diana and Prince Charles featuring sculptured butter flamingos.

Last September, Vanessa was named NSW Restaurant and Catering Association 2022 Chef of the Year for her Parliament House initiatives, which included the first 'Koori

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kitchen takeover', where six Aboriginal chef apprentices each designed a canape which was featured on the open-to-the-public Strangers' Restaurant menu. She also brought in a female chef mentoring program where her team assisted female apprentice chefs to learn on the job.

Says Vanessa: "Introducing initiatives like these keeps up everyone's interest and drive. Managing people and having respect for everyone in the kitchen from the kitchen hands to the sous chefs is my strength. There's nothing that I ask my staff to do that I wouldn't do. And I like to give people responsibility and not micromanage them."

Vanessa got her start in the food industry as a 15-year-old washing dishes after school and on weekends in restaurants in Wollongong where she lived. "I loved it. I couldn't wait for the next shift – it was wild and busy with lots of pressure and there was something about being in a kitchen that I loved and still do. I was put on to desserts pretty quickly and at 18 I came to Bowral and became a sous chef at Milton Park."

Vanessa, who was *Highlife's* food writer from 2005 to 2011, says writing recipes is "something you get a feel for over time. You work out what flavours go well together and how to work with seasonal produce."

After working overseas, she did another stint at Milton Park then worked as a chef at Hayman Island Resort in Queensland, Gibraltar Hotel Bowral, Bathers' Pavilion at Balmoral, a Sydney private dining room and was Alan Jones' personal chef for four years.

After 12 months as acting executive chef at Parliament House,

TOP TO BOTTOM DRY ICE IS A FEATURE OF HIGH TEA – "PEOPLE LOVE A BIT OF DRAMA". SAYS VANESSA; THE BOOK INCLUDES A CHAPTER ON NSW PARLIAMENT HOUSE'S COLLECTION OF ART AND ARTEFACTS, WHICH INCLUDES THE CIRCA 1870 ELKINGTON AND CO ENGLAND SILVER AND CRYSTAL PALM SERVICE; WAIT STAFF PREPARING TO SERVE DINNER IN THE MEMBERS' DINING ROOM, CIRCA 1970. INSET A 1908 LUNCHEON MENU IN THE PRESIDENT'S ROOM (ALL PHOTOGRAPHS © NSW PARLIAMENT).







VANESSA WITH HER WEST HIGHLAND TERRIER HADLEY AT HOME IN MOSS VALE (PHOTOGRAPH TONY SHEFFIELD).

Vanessa applied again in 2017 for the permanent role. "My daughters were very young, and I remember my mum saying, 'You can't take on a job like that with little children'. But I have a great husband and we had au pairs, so it worked."

"It is a full-on role – on budget night I have 80 staff – and there is always something going on. It's tricky when the division bells ring and suddenly the dining room is empty, and all the meals need to be brought back into kitchen and covered with cloches before being re-served."

When it came to selecting recipes for the book, Vanessa compiled a list of favourites served at Parliament House, which as well as Strangers' Restaurant includes the Members' Dining Room (for members of parliament only), the Speaker's Room, the President's Suite, and numerous function areas including one that holds 700 people standing. Some of the recipes are ones she also cooks for her own family – husband Graham Harcourt and children, Alice, 11, and Francesca, 7.

"As well as easy recipes like jam drops and chocolate chip cookies, I wanted to include more complex ones such as a delicious lobster ravioli with lobster butter sauce and raw zucchini salad," says Vanessa, who styled every photo in the book using props from Parliament House. "My chocolate delight cake is an absolute no-fail that I serve at every birthday celebration."

Vanessa regularly uses native ingredients in the Parliament House kitchens and she included several classic Australian recipes such as Anzac biscuits, so the book could work as a gift to tourists or foreign visitors. There's also a chapter of High Tea recipes, many of which are served as part of the popular Friday high tea in Strangers' Restaurant. "We serve delicate sweet and savoury dishes on Parliamentary Crested Wedgwood plates and add in touches like dry-ice effects. People love a bit of drama – the high tea is booked out three months in advance."

Other recipe chapters include Land, Dairy and Paddock, which enabled Vanessa to highlight NSW producers, reflecting practices in Parliament's kitchens. She says parliamentarians are keen for regions around NSW to be showcased on the regularly

changing menus, so apples might come from Bilpin or Batlow, olive oil from the Hunter Valley and potatoes and raspberries from the Highlands. A summery entree recipe of sheep curd, tomato, basil oil and pea salad suggests using Robertson's award-winning Pecora Dairy sheep curd.

There are also photos of special serving artefacts acquired in the 1870s and of Parliament House's art collection including textile artist Fahy Bottrell's tapestries, which were commissioned for Strangers' Restaurant in the 1980s. "We visited Fahy at her home on the Central Coast and interviewed her about how she created these works," says Vanessa. "We heard about how her

"This book was a fantastic team effort, and we're so proud to have pieced together a history that was previously unknown and untold."

love of jazz influenced the tapestries and how she made the pieces from wool she blended from scraps – her 'recycled wool thrums'."

After five years of giving the job "everything I had", Vanessa is enjoying having more time with her family. "I feel so privileged to work at Parliament House. It's a great feeling to walk through the front gates and we get to know all the members of parliament. Even on long days when Parliament is sitting and there's a lot of pressure, it's a joy to be there."

"Putting together this book was a fantastic team effort, and we're so proud to have pieced together a history that was previously unknown and untold." **HL**

*Dining at New South Wales Parliament (NSW Parliament, \$49.99) is available from [parliamentarycatering.com.au](http://parliamentarycatering.com.au) or from the NSW Parliament House gift shop.*