



PRIVATE CHEFS WERE ONCE
THE PRESERVE OF THE
ULTRA-WEALTHY – BUT
CHANGE IS ON THE MENU,
WRITES **OLIVIA RIORDAN**.

GUESS WHO'S COOKING DINNER

Pivate chefs have seen it all. From a degustation dinner aboard a private jet, to dodging paparazzi outside a celebrity birthday bash. But as luxury is redefined, are some of the trimmings that go with it becoming more accessible?

When you're cooking for high-net-worth individuals, the abnormal quickly becomes normal, says Sydney-based private chef Clancy Atkinson. A quick glance at Atkinson's Instagram account is akin to flicking through his passport – St Barts, New York, Cape Town, Istanbul, Hawaii – and that's just in the past year.

Far from a holiday, while Atkinson may travel the world with his clients, he's on call 24/7. It could be as simple as boiling an egg every morning, or as elaborate as a New Year's Eve gala dinner in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Why does a billionaire need a private chef to boil an egg?

"Because they can," says Atkinson.

"It's just part of their lifestyle. These people are working and networking all the time. They have EAs, bodyguards, private trainers, private chefs ... if they can afford not to do something, they won't," he says.

To even be invited into the exclusive entourage is a feat in itself. "Trust is above all the most important thing for these clients," says Atkinson. Some of them require signed confidentiality agreements to ensure that what goes on tour, stays on tour.

While most CEOs and celebrities steer clear of the kitchen, they still know good food, he says. "The less cheffy the better, they're not after Michelin star tricks, they generally just want a beautiful piece of fish, cooked simply, with fresh vegetables and salad. But for me the challenge is, I could be in the middle of a

snowstorm in Wyoming and my client wants sashimi grade ahi tuna from Hawaii, or white truffles on New Year's Eve, and I have to make it happen," says Atkinson.

"These people don't like hearing 'no', so you go to any means necessary."

But even with all the money in the world, things can go wrong. While travelling with an international media mogul, Atkinson was asked to prepare a 10-course degustation dinner for two aboard a private jet en route to St Barts. Shortly after take-off, a small fire broke out in the jet's oven. Apparently, the same jet had previously been used by pop singer Justin Bieber, who had requested cookies and the leftovers had caught alight.

In the spirit of "don't say no", the degustation still went on.

Back in Sydney, Atkinson is one of a few high-end private chefs in an industry that is noticeably smaller than overseas. "The market in Sydney is slowly changing, but it still seems that people in Australia think a private chef is extravagant, whereas in Europe, America, or even Asia, it's almost a necessity for these types of professionals," says Atkinson.

Millie Katter takes a more local, low-key approach to her work as a private chef, but her clients are just as well-heeled. Based in Sydney full-time, Katter has a handful of clients she cooks for on a weekly basis.

Without breaking the unwritten code of confidentiality, how would Katter characterise her clients? "They have to be wealthy, number one, but they also have to appreciate beautiful, healthy, seasonal food," she says.

Every Monday evening, Katter starts her week cooking for a client in Woollahra, who invites their children (and their partners) over for a family dinner. They call it Millie Monday. "It's not that the client can't cook, she knows good food, but she just wants to be able to spend time with her children," says Katter.

While some clients provide a budget for produce and provisions, others allow free rein.

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Recently, for "Millie Monday", Katter prepared an eight-kilogram octopus, with tentacles nearly a metre in diameter. "It's kind of fun to be able to spend whatever you like on ingredients, I'm like a kid in a candy store."

The bottom line? Most private chefs charge by the hour, excluding ingredients. Katter's rates range from \$80 to \$100, depending on how many people she is cooking for and Atkinson's hourly rate is \$60, when based in Sydney. When it comes to international travel, Atkinson negotiates a monthly fee (excluding travel costs and ingredients), of up to \$20,000, to be on-call 24/7.

Is there a middle ground? Josiah Ng and his wife Kim Ong are banking on that being the case, with the launch of their online platform, Intertain. The website enables customers to book a private chef online, while allowing the chefs to run their own business. They launched in Melbourne in August, before rolling out in Sydney in October, with plans to expand nationwide and internationally.

Intertain targets professional, dual-income, time-poor households where even the notion of throwing a dinner party is stress-inducing. Users can browse the website by location, chef and cuisine, all with a transparent pricing structure, inclusive of ingredients. Chef's menus range from \$44 per person for a three-course meal, with a minimum of six people; up to \$220 a person for a degustation by ex-Rockpool sous chef Robbie Bell. "We're finding people love the variety," says Ng.

Intertain is not the first platform of its kind, with some less successful start-up case studies in San Francisco and New York. But Ng is confident they have the right business model and that Australia is the right target market. "Private chefs are just like private chauffeurs once were – only the very select had access to private chauffeurs, and Uber has brought that to the masses," he says. "That is what we're trying to do for private chefs." ❌



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