



You are here: | [Home](#) | [Food](#)

## Bill Granger: the breakfast's champion

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Over the last quarter century Bill Granger has built a successful, globe-spanning culinary empire while introducing the world to the joys of modern Australian cuisine and casual dining. It's not a bad record of achievement for a self-taught cook who never planned to go into the food business.

### Tags

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[Coffee](#)  
[Culture](#)  
[UK](#)  
[RSS on](#)  
[Australian cafes](#)  
[Food](#)



Unlike many of those who go on to pursue a career in the food industry, Bill Granger has no happy childhood memories of whipping up treats in the kitchen under the loving supervision of a parent or grandparent. Granger's father was a butcher and his mother a vegetarian who, like many Australian women of her generation, saw cooking as a chore. "My parents ended up separating," Granger remembers. "But even before that we never ate together as a family."

It wasn't until he started getting invited to eat with friend's families that the young Granger came to understand how pleasurable and relationship enriching family meals could be. "I'd be invited over to the houses of friends who were Chinese, Greek or Jewish and saw that food was an important part of their life, that they would sit down to a big meal together and talk to each other. That's the side of food I most enjoy."

For all his enjoyment of eating at friend's houses and, more rarely, at restaurants growing up, Granger was initially set on a career as an artist and moved to Sydney from Melbourne to enrol in art school after high school. At age 23, with no formal training in cooking, Granger quit his job as a waiter and launched a café specialising in breakfasts at a time when very few Australians ate outside the home before noon. "I had the arrogance of youth," Granger laughs. "I didn't have that sense, which I certainly do now, that I could fail." While he was not the only significant figure, Granger was one of the most prominent pioneers of a revolution in Australian cuisine that was transform the way first Australians, then the citizens of many other nations, approached food.

"In 1992, when I launched the first Bills in Sydney's Darlinghurst there was nowhere you could go in the morning to get a good coffee and reasonably priced, fresh food. People thought I was mad, they told me that nobody would get up and go out for breakfast," he says.

As it turned out, people were soon queuing up for the self-taught cook's exquisitely realised ricotta hotcakes with banana and honeycomb butter or scrambled eggs on sourdough toast. With their food delivered to communal tables diners were encouraged to chat with both staff and their fellow customers.

"Cafes and restaurants are strange things," Granger notes. "You're creating a personal space in a commercial environment. It's always been my approach that they should be a place of pleasure, that they're not just a place to eat but they should become part of people's lives, somewhere they go regularly."

But Bills wasn't only about a friendly, laidback approach to dining – it was also about making fresh, seasonal ingredients the focus of uncluttered and unpretentious dishes while drawing on the different culinary traditions that were readily available in multicultural Australia.

"It was around that time Australia was going through a food revolution, moving away from traditional British food and embracing something more exotic," Granger says. "A new wave of people came through and started doing interesting things. And the Australian public educated themselves about food. They began to take a real interest in and expect to be served decent food. They began eating Japanese, Thai and Indian and ended up becoming much more adventurous diners than people in many countries. That type of sea change didn't happen in countries such as Italy and France with a strong food culture and it happened a lot later in countries such as the UK, where it was only a decade ago you had people like Jamie Oliver emerging and saying that everyone should be entitled to good food."

Following the success of his first café in Darlinghurst, Granger went on to open other Bills, first throughout Sydney and, once he believed he'd "learnt as much as I could in Australia", throughout the world.

In an industry where failure is the norm, Granger now owns three Bills in Sydney, four in Tokyo, one in Honolulu and is about to launch one in Seoul. He also has two restaurants, [Granger & Co](https://web.archive.org/web/20150205071728/http://www.grangerandco.com/) [https://web.archive.org/web/20150205071728/http://www.grangerandco.com/], in Clerkenwell and Notting Hill London. Despite a record of success that now spans two decades, five nations, 10 popular cookbooks, several widely broadcast TV programs and his own column in Britain's *The Independent*, Granger is quick to point out that his success hasn't arrived as effortlessly as the "magazine profile version" of his career might suggest. In particular, exporting Australia's food and its casual approach to dining in places such as Tokyo and London was no simple matter.

"Australia is in the same position as the USA when it comes to food. People who've been to those countries know there is great food there but people who haven't don't. Whether it's Japan or the UK, consumers are not so aware of our premium products. And there's no silver bullet to fix that, it's a matter of slowly changing people's minds."

Japanese diners now queue for hours to get into the four Bills cafes in Tokyo. That's only come about after Granger devoted a huge amount of time and effort to educating the market about a breakfast and brunch culture that was utterly foreign. "I moved there for 18 months, doing media, doing pop-ups and finding suitable Japanese partners who had the necessary local knowledge to help me make it work. Everyone told me the Japanese didn't have a great perception of Australian food and that they would never go out for breakfast. So it was a long education process."

Granger makes only the most minor of concessions to local tastes. "Bills are basically the same wherever they are and I'm very careful about keeping it like that," Granger says. "The atmosphere and service is important and that has to reflect a very Aussie laconic charm and friendliness. We'll fly out staff from Hawaii, Japan and the UK and take them out on a boat on Sydney Harbour so they can understand how people live and behave in Australia". This approach helps staff embrace the Australian approach to service once they're home.

Granger, possibly the world's most charmingly laidback overachiever, says while he remains hungry for new challenges he has no overarching goal. "I've got great staff, some of whom have been working for me for 20 years now, and the good thing about growth is that you can give them new jobs to keep them interested," he says.

"With business, as with life in general, you've always got to remember that the good times never last and neither do the bad times. If you're an entrepreneurial person you're always going to want push yourself to the edge of your ability and that carries a certain amount of risk. Business is a journey and you've just got to keep learning and keep getting better."