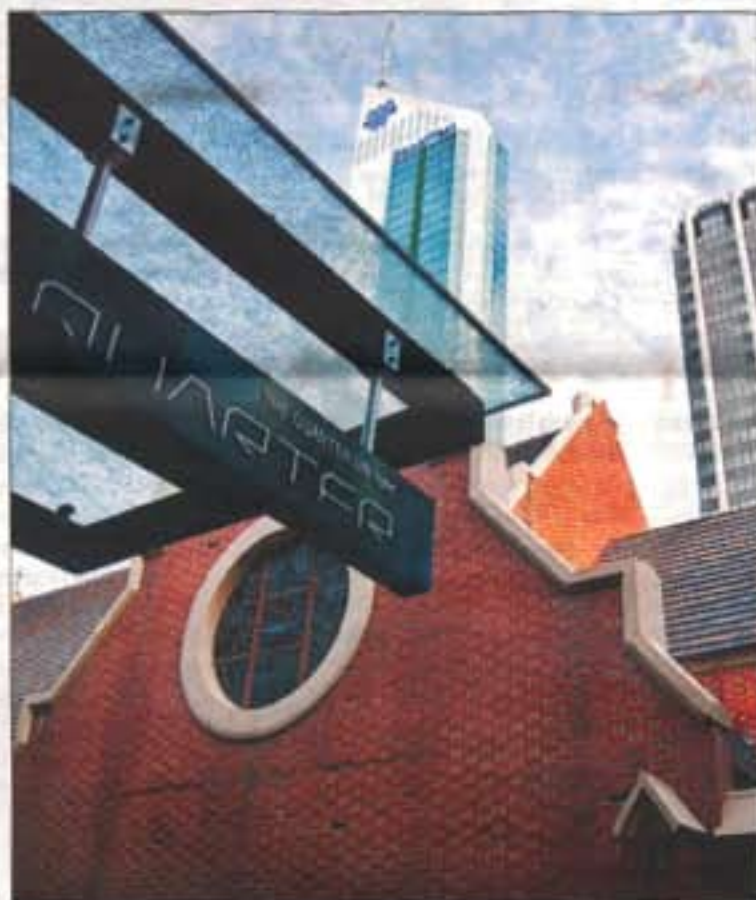


# Quarter comes around full circle



**CLASS ACT:** Ryan Taylor has faced a range of unexpected challenges in getting his restaurant to its current position, with some positive critical reviews last year providing a welcome boost to business. Photo: Grant Curraill

Gourmet breakfasts featuring steak and black pudding are among Ryan Taylor's latest creations at his fine-dining restaurant, the Quarter on Hay. Carolyn Herbert reports.

**I**MMERSED in the hospitality industry from an early age, a love of food and customer service is in Ryan Taylor's blood.

His father was a chef, his mother a food and beverage manager, and with much of his 20s spent working alongside Balthazar founder Nic Trimboli, there was always a possibility Mr Taylor would one day open his own fine-dining restaurant.

"I can't remember ever not being around food," Mr Taylor told *Gusto*.

"My first pay cheque was 50 bucks when I was eight years old and I was clearing some plates and helping my dad out by chopping up some vegetables."

Before he opened his restaurant, the Quarter on Hay, in October of 2009, Mr Taylor worked in the hospitality industry for more than a decade, as manager of fine-dining at the Heron and as part of Mr Trimboli's management team at Bende, Balthazar and Ecucina.

However, in 2005 at the age of 29, Mr Taylor felt he should end a career that would provide greater financial stability.

"I felt at my age, I should have done something more responsible and I was ready for a rest from hospitality," he says.

Mr Taylor accepted a job in PR at Hays Recruitment and worked there for almost four years.

An office job was not all that it was cracked up to be and Mr Taylor's passion for hospitality always bubbled away beneath the surface.

"I wanted to see what it was like to have weekends off, but it turned out that the corporate world wasn't a huge reduction in stress at all and my love of hospitality was always there," he says.

Mr Taylor began to cast his eye over potential sites on Hay Street with a view of setting up his own gourmet lunch bar.

A representative of the Wesley Uniting Church told Mr Taylor's mother that it wanted to set up a restaurant at the Wesley Quarter on the corner of William and Hay streets.

"So I looked at the site and thought it would be a lot of work, but with the Bankwest tower nearby, Central Park across the road, and the new City Square building just a

short step away, I thought the location was right," Mr Taylor says.

Originally, Mr Taylor wanted to create a gourmet 'Monday to Friday' lunch bar that served breakfast and lunch for dine-in and take away.

"I was inspired by Ottolenghi in London, a series of stores that does gourmet meals where everything is made in-house," he says.

Mr Taylor started the process of interviewing chefs for The Quarter on Hay and met Shannon Wilson, the head chef at Sir Richard Branson's Kensington Roof Gardens.

"Shannon just got back from London, he came straight off the plane and he showed me his food on a laptop, which was this magnificent, modern European food," Mr Taylor says.

Must Wine Bar co-owner and bistro chef Russell Blaikie helped with the interview process.

"Russell has been my mentor and he said to me, 'In my professional opinion I would hire Chef A, but as a chef, if you hire Shannon, I'll eat at your place'," Mr Taylor says.

By hiring Mr Wilson, Mr Taylor knew he would have to change the original business model.

"I knew I couldn't have him doing salads and take-away and when I saw the fit-out I just knew that this was no longer what I thought it was going to be. I knew that I would have to quit my job and be a part of it," Mr Taylor says.

While waiting for the tavern licence to be approved, Mr Taylor decided to trial his gourmet cafe idea for three months.

"We had real liquor licensing issues; we had no objections but it still took a good six to seven months to get the licence approved, so we trialed the gourmet cafe idea and it wasn't as successful as I hoped," he says.

Once the licence was granted, Mr Taylor decided it was time to put his chef's talents on display and market Quarter as a modern, fine-dining experience.

However, the Perth CBD crowd was hesitant to accept the concept.

"We started off with breakfast and lunch then I realised I couldn't have this food and not be open at night."

While Wednesday to Friday night dinner was popular with the corporate crowd, Saturday night was a different story.

"The first Saturday night we were open, it was awful, nobody came and I played Monopoly with one of my staff members," Mr Taylor says.

A fine-dining lunch was also proving problematic, with business people demanding meals that could be served quickly.

"I realised that gone are the days in the business world where people did lunch over a three-hour period, some of our dishes take almost 30 minutes to prepare, so we faced becoming irrelevant if we didn't make a change," he says.

So Mr Taylor introduced a lighter lunch menu geared at his corporate clientele, which could be prepared and enjoyed within an hour.

After almost eight months of trial and error, glowing reviews from local media in June of last year led to a dramatic lift in Quarter's business.

"We started to get so busy for lunch and dinner I decided to close for breakfast, to allow Shannon to focus on the food, because I still wasn't in a position financially to hire more chefs to cope with it all," Mr Taylor says.

But he told *Gusto* he could feel consumer sentiment change towards the end of last year, with people 'tightening their belts' due to interest rate hikes and rising utility costs.

"I decided to re-open for breakfast in January of this year, but it needed to be in line with our core product," Mr Taylor says.

Worried that 'eggs on toast' didn't reflect Quarter's image, Mr Taylor recently launched his gourmet breakfast menu with items such as steak and black pudding.

"My next big project is to see if Perth people will eat a gourmet breakfast. I'm worried that people won't accept it but at the same time, bacon and egg sandwiches just don't represent our restaurant in the right light."