



ist within sight, but a world away from his sky-high restaurant Vue de Monde, chef Shannon Bennett has multi-million-dollar plans for one of Melbourne's most iconic, but forgotten, estates. **SIMON PLANT** meanders through the plans

ON the 55th floor of the Rialto building, where his Vue de Monde restaurant is perched, Shannon Bennett can just make out the Dandenong Ranges as a bluish blur. His view is vastly different from the of Burnham Beeches. Standing on the roof of this ee-storey art moderne mansion, deep in the forest at rbrooke, Bennett has everything laid before him: at stands of mountain ash, towering firs and clusters irth and beech. 'Hear that?' he asks as a bird call trills through lies of greenery. "It's a tyre bird ... you see them on driveway. Very distinctive call." Birdwatching, however, isn't what has drawn nnett to Burnham Beeches on a warm autumn rning. The acclaimed chef-restaurateur co-owns ; sprawling '30s-era pile built by Alfred Nicholas, of ro fame, and he is sharing with *Weekend* his otious plans to recast it as a six-star hotel. "To bring it back to where we think it should be, e're probably talking \$15 million," he says. With iness partner Adam Garrisson, Bennett also plans onvert the 23ha surrounding Burnham Beeches o a biodynamic farm and self-sufficient "village" h bakery, brewery, dairy, trufferie, steakhouse and room. Work is advancing on all fronts with Burnham tery and Piggery Cafe expected to open after Easter. Bennett's dream of a grand boutique hotel in the

hills will take much longer. Burnham Beeches, you see, is a beautiful ruin. So neglected, it's hard to imagine this was once a swish private hotel where bellboys took your luggage and uniformed waiters popped champagne corks and Gershwin numbers — played on grand pianos — gusted through corridors. Burnham Beeches Country House, as it was known, closed in 1992 and the years since have not been kind with vandals pilfering plaster mouldings and wildlife nesting in dark, dusty corners. The day Bennett arrived to inspect the property, in 2009, a wallaby sprang out the front door and almost knocked him over. "I thought that had to be a sign," he says. "Especially as it was a Bennetts wallaby." Stepping inside the abandoned building, Bennett was struck by the bare-bones beauty of its streamlined design. Especially its ocean liner curves, floor-to-ceiling windows and zigzag balustrades. "I'd heard of Burnham Beeches and its legacy from many of our (Vue de Monde) diners," he says. "So I was



sold on the romance and excitement of it, but being there and seeing it for myself. That really inspired me." Flicking cobwebs off his crushed-linen jacket, Bennett takes us for a guided tour and sees light at the end of every dimly lit tunnel. "This will be our fine-dining room," he says, arriving in one vacant space. "Forty seats." Bennett swivels, his loafers scuffing on bare concrete, and points south. "That's the 1950s Forest Wing. Putting some garden suites in there." When it was built, Burnham Beeches was the last word in modernity with an elevator, theatrette and electric pipe organ. Bennett wants all those things back in working order ... along with a two-lane bowling alley. "In a way, I'm glad it fell into this position for 20 years," he says. "Means no one else came in and botched it." We press on, through a ballroom and past an empty indoor pool. Finally, a steep set of stairs take us on to the roof. This is where Bennett hopes to create "the most luxurious penthouse suite in Australia", an exclusive eyrie equipped with butlers, bars and a croquet lawn. "Apparently, Prince Charles and Diana stayed here when they came in 1985," he says. Bennett is more intrigued to learn that Nicholas — an eccentric businessman — would bathe on the roof while listening to organ music, piped from below. "Lots of fun, spirited things happened here," he says. "I want to reintroduce some of that spirit." But Burnham Beeches is not some idle fol'y, nor is it a philanthropic venture. Bennett — as renowned for his five-star food as his partnership with actor Madeleine West — means to make money. "There's got to be a return on everything you do," he says, "and sustainability is all to do with being profitable by doing things right. The local community up here 'gets' that. What we need now is for bureaucracy to be on our side and get behind this."



## BURNHAM BEECHES HAS A CURIOUS PAST

Alfred Nicholas (1881-1937), merchant and philanthropist, purchased land in Sherbrooke in 1929 and engaged architect Harry Norris to build him a summer residence in the then fashionable art moderne style. Nicholas — whose successful Melbourne firm developed the Aspro formula — also bought up surrounding blocks for an expansive garden combining native and deciduous trees.

After his death, Burnham Beeches was used as a wartime hospital and science research facility, with the Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens donated to the people of Victoria in 1965.

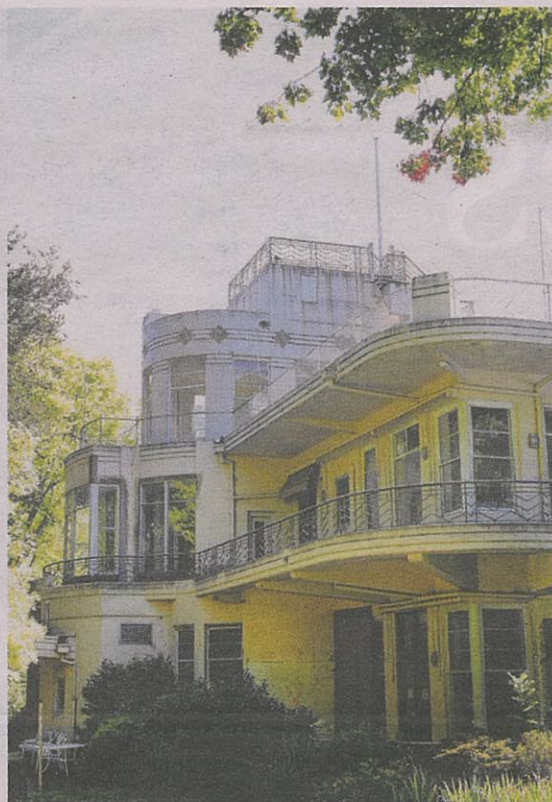
The main house operated as a country hotel from the 1980s.



Bennett and Garrisson — a developer with an eye for sites of architectural significance — thought their chances of redeveloping Burnham Beeches were dubious. Even after going in “50-50” to secure the place, they had no blueprint. Instead, the two men “came up about once a month, had a bit of a wander round and let the vision evolve”.

Wise move. Bennett already has his hands full running a multi-million-dollar hospitality business which spans 10 venues and employs 300 people.

Does West think he's mad taking on another challenge?



“No, Madeleine's a big supporter. She's my positive force field.”

Chart the irresistible rise of Shannon Bennett and you see this Westmeadows boy, educated at Essendon Grammar, has always balanced romance with pragmatism.

“I never felt I fitted in at school,” he wrote in his 2004 book, *My Vue*. “I was a dreamer.”

But travelling to Europe in his late teens, with dreams of a career in Michelin-starred restaurants, he soon toughened up. “Don't panic, work hard” was his motto and the old-school discipline of UK mentors such as Marco Pierre White informed the atmosphere of his first, modest restaurant in Faraday St, Carlton.

“Screaming, swearing, staring, sweating” ... that's how Bennett describes his angry early days at Vue de Monde. Customers only saw the beautiful French-inspired food he produced and kept coming back. Awards followed. So did media attention.

“It made me realise that I was either a maverick chef with a limited shelf life or a businessman,” Bennett says. “I wanted to be both and with careful planning it could be done.”

In 2005, Vue de Monde migrated to Normanby Chambers in the CBD. Bistro Vue and Cafe Vue followed then came Cafe Vue at Heide Museum of Modern Art. By 2011, Bennett was ready to take Vue de Monde to new heights at the Rialto.

“When things get too hard for a lot of people these days, they give up,” he says. “That's not me. You never know what's round the corner. Just keep fighting for what you love doing and it should all work out.”

Bennett wants Vue de Monde to be “Australia's most sustainable restaurant” using “homegrown and small-farm organic produce wherever possible.”

Burnham Beeches is already supplying some of that produce, from beehive honey to emu eggs. Six Jersey cows for milking are on their way and a fast-growing trufferie will eventually yield 150kg of truffles a year, (no doubt a large part of the reason why Bennett is a passionate supporter of the inaugural Truffle Melbourne festival to be held at Caulfield Racecourse in July). But Bennett seems most excited by the estate's vegetable garden where broccoli and tomatoes are



**Grand plans:** chef Shannon Bennett, with dog MJ (far left), has a vision to restore Burnham Beeches (above), paying homage to the 1930s; and (above right) Bennett and MJ on the mansion's roof.

PICTURES  
NICOLE CLEARY

already sprouting in rich chocolate soil.

“Irrigation is our biggest challenge out here,” he says. “There's a lot of rain, but we can't capture it.”

Vue de Monde chefs will eventually spend at least one day a month at Burnham Beeches, shaping menus based on what's seasonally available.

The glorious gardens at Burnham Beeches are also being enhanced. Nicholas engaged a Cornish

gardener named Percival Trevaskis to do the landscaping which included artificial waterfalls and a lake. Acclaimed landscape gardener Phillip Johnson (a Best in Show winner at last year's Chelsea Flower Show) has now signed on as a consultant to enlarge that original vision.

As for the mansion, the plan is to pay homage to the 1930s, not return it to a period-perfect standard. Bennett says: “Adam's great skill lies in styling things and I've picked up from him a great passion for adding a touch of modern to a touch of old.”

The Woods Bagot design firm has the job of integrating Burnham Beeches with other structures on the site including informal accommodation spaces.

“They'll be sprinkled through the forest,” Bennett explains. Drawing board plans also describe stand-alone villas to help fund the hotel's renovation.

“There's got to be something for everybody here, whether you're coming up for a hike or arriving by helicopter.”

Top-end guests will certainly encounter luxury when the hotel opens in 2018, but Bennett's definition of “six-star” is all about “offering a unique experience, not just extra gold taps”.

“I want people to walk in like they're home for the night, then walk out having learned something whether it's about truffles or emu eggs or what's growing in the veggie garden. We might even pay them to work in the gardens if they want ... it can come off their hotel bill.”

Ending our tour of Burnham Beeches, with dappled sunshine filtering through the trees, I ask Bennett if the responsibility of getting Burnham Beeches right weighs heavily on him.

“Oh yeah, all the time,” he says. “This is huge, what we're doing, but we're determined to make it work.”



# melbourne's hidden secrets

## special report

### Grand plans for Burnham Beeches

Plans for a six-star retreat will have people heading for the hills, writes **Sandy Guy**.

**S**tage one of chef and restaurateur Shannon Bennett's "Jurassic Park for foodies" is up-and-running at historic Burnham Beeches in Sherbrooke.

The Piggery Café, in the property's restored stables and piggery, and adjoining Burnham Bakery are the first businesses to open as part of Bennett and business partner Adam Garrisson's grand plans for the 23-hectare property.

The Burnham Beeches mansion and surrounding gardens were built by Alfred Nicholas who, with his brother George, a pharmacist, developed Australia's first aspirin.

The Nicholas fortunes grew

from headaches: by 1929 Alfred had purchased land to build a three-storey mansion in the fashionable Streamline Moderne style, complete with its own cinema and lift, and develop extensive woodland gardens and a tranquil ornamental lake.

Today the magnificent Alfred Nicholas Memorial Gardens, where colourful rosellas flit through the trees and ducks glide across the lake, are among Victoria's horticultural treasures.

Bennett and Garrisson's vision for the property will see the Art Deco mansion restored and transformed into a six-star retreat of luxury accommodation, a day spa, restaurant, pool, rooftop



croquet lawn and bowling alley.

Visitors can already enjoy phase one of Operation Burnham Beeches with crusty sourdough bread and superb pastries from the bakery, and dine at the rustic Piggery Café, where breakfast menu choices include cassoulet with corn fritter baguette (\$12.50).

Luncheon dishes such as Flinders Island lamb korma pie (\$24) and Blackmore Wagyu beef burger (\$12) have diners heading for the hills, as does the Piggery's afternoon tea of savoury creations, scones, and a decadent selection of pastries (from \$25).

While a 500-tree trufflerie, vegetable gardens and an emu enclosure have already been established, plans are also afoot for Australia's longest chicken run, a 16-cow automated dairy, steakhouse and microbrewery.

Burnham Beeches is at 1 Sherbrooke Road, Sherbrooke. Open from 10am to 5pm Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm Saturday and Sunday.

No booking required.

More at [piggerycafe.com.au](http://piggerycafe.com.au).

**Bold vision: Shannon Bennett has big plans for the historic estate; sweet treats at The Piggery Cafe.**