



*A glass or two with*  
**Wayne Cooper**

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Wayne Cooper, designer for the fashion conscious' skinniest and inniest, rocks into Sydney's exclusive Icebergs Restaurant at Bondi in a deliciously dishevelled state.



His eyes, a dangerous bloodshot blue, settle slowly – placated by the welcoming flute of Verve. “I wouldn’t say I’m a wine connoisseur. I couldn’t sit with you like them dudes in *Sideways*. You know what I mean? Like, ‘If he asks for Merlot, I’m leaving’. It can be snobby,” he assesses in his distinctive East London brogue. “When I got a new fridge, the old one went under the house. The wine fridge is kind of naughty because it always has loads of wine in it. I buy a load at a time.”

It’s a refreshingly unpretentious attitude for a man operating in the most pretentious of industries – that is, fashion. “It’s bulls\*\*t you know. I mean, we just make dresses. That’s our thing. I make a dress, you’re an accountant, you’re a lawyer, you’re a brain surgeon. Who do you think the girls want to talk to at a party? The f\*\*ing fashion designer because he makes the dress. It’s instant gratification.”

“But what kind of girl”, I ask, as the Verve segues seamlessly into 2004 Villa Maria Cellar Selection Sauvignon Blanc and the crisp white tablecloths brave the potential of my aged parmesan with figs and crustini and Cooper’s choice of pillowy South Australian Coffin Bay oysters. “You see, that’s the thing. What sort of girl hangs out at fashion do’s? What sort of girl is that?” He answers his own question as our starters arrive.

“There’s an 80% chance that a girl who follows fashion is attractive, and an 80% chance she’s not that clever. You do get the odd ones who are really worth the chat, but it seems to be that if you are good looking you kind of realise you don’t need to learn much and you can get away with more. Good looking people generally have a lot easier go at it. But fashion does get a bit of a hard run. The actual designers are very intelligent and deep, artistic people. By the way,” he asks, before the seductiveness of wine, food and the most magnificent of ocean views overtakes any rhyme or reason attributable to the ordinary man, “Ooo’s paying for this?”

And well may he ask. It’s been a challenging year for the 43-year-old partner of Sarah and father of Ruby, 6 and Jude, 4, whose

fabric confections have graced the most lithe of feminine forms. He likes his girls to look skinny, pretty and ready to pleasure. From Toni Pearen’s 2005 pink lame Logies bottom brusher, to a fabulous frock that nearly covered Paris Hilton’s cleavage, Wayne Cooper’s designs have always involved as little fabric as possible. This was the case with his debut label *Brave*, and continued into the event focussed *Wayne Cooper* line and now with the cuter, less expensive, more flirtatious, *Wayne*. It’s ironic therefore, that in April 2005, due partially he claims to an over order of material, he survived a crisis that put his cherished business into Voluntary Administration.

“I’ve been doing it for 15 years. It’s one of those industries where you have the fear of going down from the day you start and it just remains with you. It’s not like I made a number one hit song – and you’re set for life. There’s no royalty on a good frock. So what I did was this. All the money the business owed the bank, like the fit outs for the shops and the fabrics – I just re mortgaged the house and paid them off. All the creditors – it’s square. But now I’ve got the mortgage from hell.”

Lubricated by our next drop of 1998 Tyrrell’s VAT 1 Semillon from the Hunter Valley to complement our entrée of prawns and a delicious crab concoction, the rapport was growing. We shared from each other’s plates. For two people who’d only met an hour earlier, it seemed only natural to explore the modern man’s fear of failure. “It ain’t all about the money. I like work. I like the team of people I work with. I love our studio. So the money wasn’t really the issue. My life was going to disappear. And I thought bloody hell, I’ve given all I can and I’m still f\*\*ked. Morrissey (Peter) had a s\*\*t time. Akira (Isogawa) has had a s\*\*t time. Collette (Dinnigan) had a s\*\*t time. They all have. In America they’re quite into failing a couple of times. It’s the way to go. Over here, they’re not so into failing. They actually slag you off big time. But Charlie Brown



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– she went down and came back flying didn’t she?”

The tablecloth was holding up well, delighting in its gradual descent into dirty yummy sticky business. But you knew it was made to bounce back. Like Wayne Cooper. Bred for the fight. Despite fashion seeming to be the domain of the rich and famous, Cooper’s perspective seems more *On the Buses than Ab Fab*.

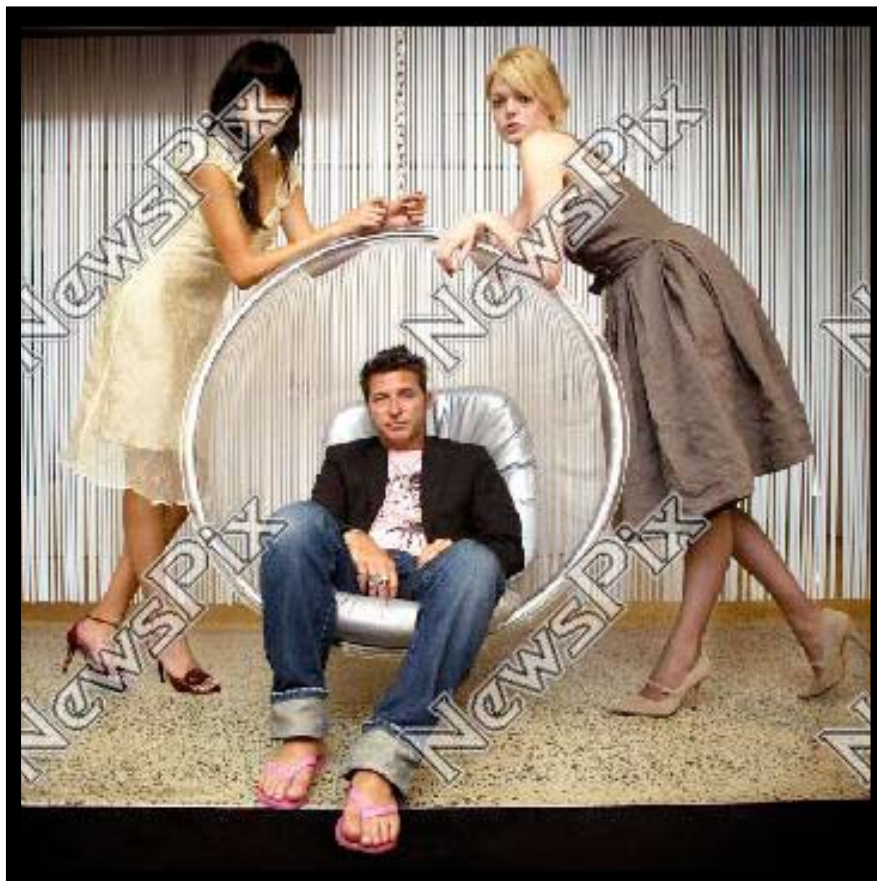
“It’s like being in the East End when I was a kid. Everyone looked like they were worth a million dollars but they all lived in council flats. They took themselves out of their humdrum poor world and became special for an evening. My Dad, he’d go get a mohair suit made, beautifully tailored and he’d pick my mother up for the day wearing a glamorous 50s dress, and they would feel special. Dad’s a cab driver. Mum was a cleaner. They knew they couldn’t afford to live that kind of way. But those clothes and that little bit of make-up and having that hairdo, they felt special.”

It was these memories that steered young Wayne along the path that became his passion. “There was no one in my school who had ever gone to University. Everyone used to just piss off at 16. I stayed on and got three Grade A ‘A’ levels. Which meant I could go to University. It was major news down at my school, down in the East End. We were poor. So the government would give you money. When I was at Law School, my Dad took my money for his gambling debts – he used to play cards and gamble on the horses. So I needed to work and got a job in fashion at Jones in Kings Road.”

But why fashion? “It was the 80s in London. We were just into it. The place I worked at had all the newest, hottest labels of the time. The guys I met...most of them were gay, long hair, wore girls’ dresses. We used to hang out with Marilyn and Frankie;

you know, ‘Frankie goes to Hollywood?’ We wore all this make-up and s\*\*t. And I’d go back to Law School and it was boring. (Fashion) is way more fun, and I liked the people. That’s what I decided I wanted to do. Finished Law School. Went to Bar School – finished that.

“And then...this is a bad story, I haven’t told anybody this one. I was going to open a shop in London with my girlfriend and make clothes, but then we got into a fight in the East End with these nightclub bouncers who had already killed a guy with baseball bats on the same night, which we didn’t know. On the Friday night we were out, and they had come to our bar after doing this, and my friends had been going with their girlfriends the weekend before in Brighton. So they weren’t happy with my best mates, who were big East End types. So the next minute, it went off. My mate Mark is on the floor. They got a pint glass, smashed it and then shoved it in his face. My mate Gary got knocked out, and then I – because of what was going on – smashed a glass and cut this guy in the arm. I had my Katherine Hamnet pale grey suit on at the time. I had long blond hair. Blood was everywhere. My hair was claret. They went outside and got guns out of their car and come back in and started shooting the place up after us...It was the Jets wine bar – it was packed. Me and my mate Andre, we were the smaller two, the others were big – we were on the floor trying to crawl out of there. They saw us and chased us down the road. We’ve run round the bend, dived behind the hedge and hid and when it all settled down the police and ambulances arrived – we came back and then went to the hospital with my mate Mark. And then the guy I cut got into the hospital with these thugs to get patched up and the police arrested all (of them). Then we



Wayne Cooper at his QV store in Melbourne.

went to the police station. They cut up my suit to see whose blood was whose. Then basically they were going to the Old Bailey for the murder trial for this guy (that they'd already killed that night). Because of what happened to us, we had to go and testify. And (the guy I cut) basically said, 'If you go and testify I'm going to kill your family'. My uncle used to run illegal casinos in Sydney and told me Sydney was really cool. So I came here. But my mum and dad never knew that story. It was heavy. But then, we're East Enders. We used to get cars and go up to Epping Forest and burn them out and claim insurance on them. It was really bad but it didn't seem bad because you had nothing to judge it by as being bad. It was what you did."

So in 1985 Wayne Cooper came to Australia and took a job at Sydney Clothing store Mason's. After training in fashion at East Sydney Tech he went into partnership designing for seven years before the start of the Wayne Cooper journey. This is definitely a man who knows how to survive.

Out came spaghetti with clams, with chilli on the side. "When I came to this country I didn't know anything about anything. Like, as far as food was concerned, I never had a prawn till I came to this country, you know what I mean? Food was not a thing. Wine was not a thing. I'd drink beer, I'd take drugs and f\*\*k around. We never knew any better, but I don't wish it had never happened. I'm more a sponge for the good things. Like you should be. I wanted to learn, I wanted to know more."

His own personal style still reeks of reassured East London new romantic. A bed headed tawny blond, he thumbs his nose at his open necked black ruffled shirt and black stove piped trousers, (both from his collection) preferring black rubber thongs for his five star dining experience. "I don't think men should try too

hard the way they dress – like be groomed within an inch of their life. Their eyebrows are so plucked looking so perfect. When you look that perfect, it doesn't look good. You should look slightly dishevelled, I reckon. A bit like, dangerous."

The McLayrd Pinot Noir by Giaconda, which Cooper leaned back and savoured like the gold it promised to be and truly was, was the perfect facilitator for ruminating upon his own personal evolution as a human. "Yeah, I reckon girls like dangerous men. But you know who they choose and who they wish they were with? Two different guys. They go out with a guy that's dangerous and they fall in love – there's a real excitement about being with him. Then they actually get hooked up with him and it becomes, 'I really want normal.' Well, you didn't want normal when you met me did you? You was loving it there for a while. I think women want excitement with someone and then they want normal when things settle right down to mortgages and kids." Life's strains still weigh on him, despite his resilience.

And so we lost ourselves in the lushness of the rocket and zucchini salad before us, deflowering it with lusty appetite.

Has he ever yearned then for the secure stability of the life in the law? "I'd maybe be more rich now, but I wouldn't have had the richness of experience which is what life's all about. What you take to your grave ain't money, right? You can have ten guys sitting around a table and you're rich and you're poor. But nothing much matters at the time apart from what you've done. Always the things you've done."

And we'd just done a very well lubricated lunch. One of life's pleasures. Over which we discussed a life done to date, with inevitably more to come. So readers, meet Wayne Cooper. Well Lubricated by Libbi. ■