



# recipe FOR RECOVERY

DARCY HIGGINS

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THE COOKING CAREER OF CHEF DARCY HIGGINS HAS TAKEN HIM ALONG AUSTRALIA'S EAST COAST AND OVER TO AMERICA. LAST YEAR, JUST AS HE WAS PREPARING FOR A EUROPEAN HOLIDAY, HE WAS IN AN HORRIFIC ACCIDENT. HIS INJURIES LEFT HIM UNABLE TO WALK AND TALK. TWELVE MONTHS ON, HE'S RETURNED TO THE KITCHEN THANKS TO A MIRACULOUS RECOVERY. TONIA ZEMEK ASKED DARCY TO SHARE HIS RECIPE FOR SUCCESS.

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I'm one of those fortunate few who enjoy a flexible working life. My media jobs cover both publishing and broadcasting. In the last few years I've worked as a producer on *MasterChef* and *My Kitchen Rules*. So I've seen a host of celebrity chefs and plenty of chefs-turned-TV-hosts. When I meet Darcy Higgins, it's obvious he has the makings of a celebrity chef. He's got the looks and charisma but most importantly he has the experience to back it up. At just 25, he's worked in some pretty impressive kitchens.

After an apprenticeship at the Peregian Springs Golf Club and Coolum's Hyatt Regency, Darcy moved south to take up a position at the Park Hyatt Melbourne. Then he landed a promotion at Como House in South Yarra. In 2010 he had the opportunity to work as a cooking instructor with the Royal

Caribbean Cruise Line, stopping off in Jamaica and Mexico along the way. So he's certainly covered some miles making meals, but I'm curious to know where it all began.

"My older sister, Paige, is a chef and I guess I was inspired by her," Darcy says. "I also watched a lot of Jamie Oliver when I was in high school."

As a youngster, Darcy took up a school-based apprenticeship while attending Saint John's College in Nambour. However, cooking wasn't his only love. He was enamored with a beautiful young student by the name of Chanelle. "She wasn't like the other girls," he says. "She was really outgoing and really strong." Darcy fondly recalls their early dates and jokes that his car made him more appealing. "I had an old EH Holden; it was the coolest car on the Coast."

I suspect he's underselling his appeal because when he moved to Melbourne, sans the vintage Holden, Chanelle happily joined him and found work as an inner-city stockbroker.

They lived and worked in Melbourne for almost two years before Chanelle took off for London and Darcy accepted a position with the Royal Caribbean Cruise Line in America.

Darcy returned to Australia in 2011, by which time he had decided to join the Defence Force. After his application was accepted, he took a temporary contract with the Hyatt Regency Coolum. Darcy returned to the family home in nearby Mount Coolum while he waited for details of his enlistment.

Meanwhile, he and Chanelle were planning a three-week European vacation. It was to be a happy reunion after a year of living apart. Darcy's flight to London was booked for 24 January, 2012.

Early that morning he headed out on his scooter to buy a few things for the trip. He was just minutes from returning home when he was hit head-on by a passing van. Darcy's airborne body struck the van's windscreen and witnesses immediately called for help.

Darcy cannot remember what happened next. He was airlifted to the Royal Brisbane Hospital and spent nine days in a coma. His list of injuries reads like a horror movie; fractured skull and cheekbones, an internal brain bleed, broken jaw, collapsed lung and a fiercely lacerated right leg and detached kneecap.

"Those first couple of months are just a blur," Darcy tells me. Initially he couldn't walk or talk and was unable to eat, which seems a cruel blow for someone so passionate about food.

After a month, Darcy was transferred to the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Unit (BIRU) at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in East Brisbane. He faced a rigorous regime of therapies, including speech, physio and occupational therapy. As soon as his mobility returned, he set himself an evening routine of bedside push-ups.

Considering his injuries, his tenacity is stunning. "I did it for my family," he says. It's worth noting that Darcy comes from a big brood. He has four sisters and a brother, all of whom share a close bond. "They're really hard workers and I just drew from that. I was going to get better no matter what. I wanted the old me back and nothing was going to stop me."

Chanelle immediately returned from London to be by Darcy's side throughout his recovery. "Chanelle and my mum were angels," he says with a heartfelt gratitude that pushes through his eyes as if straight from the soul. "If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be where I am today."

Remarkably, Chanelle even managed to arrange a visit from Victoria Cross winner Ben Roberts-Smith. "I'm still in shock to this day," Darcy admits. "Meeting him inspired me for life. He told me, 'Pain is weakness leaving the body.'"

I realise it's the first time I've heard Darcy refer to pain. Despite his horrific injuries, somehow he is able to reflect on the experience with a humility and positivity that's more heroic than stoic.

After four-and-a-half months of treatment, Darcy was finally able to return home to Mount Coolum. "It was the biggest relief," he says. "I was just so thrilled to walk on the beach, get back to the gym and eat good food."

Darcy is convinced nutrition played a huge role in his recovery. Daily, Chanelle and his family prepared fresh protein, fruit and veggies to give his body the best possible path to recovery.

Today, Darcy's hungry to educate people on the role food plays in restoring the body. He advocates a fresh and organic diet and, looking at him, the proof is in the person. His skin glows and his eyes have a vitality usually only seen in professional athletes.

Darcy now looks forward to living his passion. He started penning healthy, inventive recipes while still in hospital and is currently working on his first cookbook. He's also begun writing restaurant reviews, using his insider knowledge to highlight the best spots to dine on the Coast.

I raise a glass (of sparkling mineral water) to toast his upcoming ventures. I have a sense it won't be long before I'm buying Darcy Higgins' recipe books and watching him on telly. Today was just a taste of things to come. Bon appétit! ■

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