

STM

THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE

AUGUST 23, 2009

TWEET SENSATION

How Twitter is changing the world

STYLE

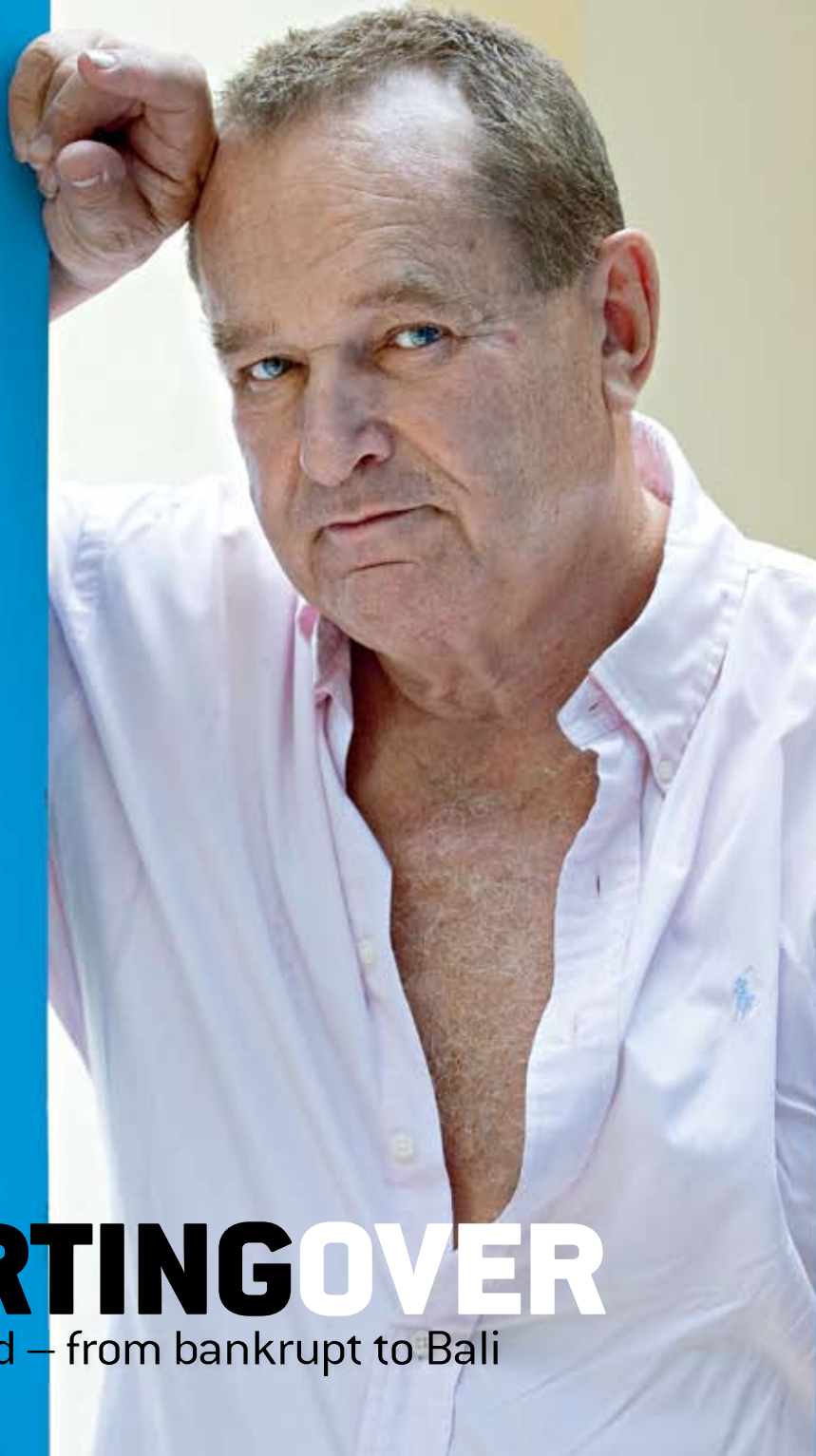
New romantics

DONNA HAY

Go green for winter

STARTING OVER

Warren Mead – from bankrupt to Bali





WARREN MEAD WITH ICA AT THE
KARMA RESORT IN JIMBARAN BAY, BALI.

W

WARREN'S

WORLD

What's next for WA restaurateur Warren Mead after losing his empire, money, house, boat, car, racehorse and sixth wife? Well, a bit of R&R in Bali and only a few regrets.

STORY: GAIL WILLIAMS PHOTOGRAPHY: KARIN CALVERT-BORSHOFF

LOOKING TANNED, FIT, RELAXED AND HAPPY,

Warren Mead lopes into view among bougainvillea, palms and frangipanis at Karma Resort in Bali's Jimbaran Bay.

He's wearing a blue shirt, shorts and thongs. But most eye-catching is the smile that says: "It's a brand new day in my brand new life, in brand new surroundings with a brand new woman."

Not quite the renaissance man, but he's positively brimming with optimism and is uncharacteristically talkative, waxing lyrical about Ica, the 28-year-old Indonesian law student now sharing his life, and he's hinting that he would be happy to add another child to his brood of nine.

"Going for double figures," he laughs. "She's pretty wild, comes from the mountains in east Indonesia, near Timor. Her father had four wives; her grandfather had 13."

Add pleasant, charming and good-humoured to the usually taciturn and grumpy Mead mix and you start to wonder what's in the Bali water.

"I never worried too much about finding something to do," he says. "Going broke never really bothered me. I wasn't going to commit suicide. If I was the sort of person who worried about having big lumps of money or driving a Porsche

instead of an old Dodge truck, then I suppose I'd be worried."

He might have lost his restaurant empire, his money, his house, his racehorse, his car, his boat, his sixth wife and, maybe, some weight – but he still has the signature Warren Mead trademarks that accompanied him through 25 years of being the biggy of Perth's hospitality business.

That is the unmistakable Mead cockiness and prize fighter's mumble, the words rolling around in his mouth like marbles – and not surprising given that his start in Australia, after arriving by ship in 1964 from New Zealand, was as sparring partner for an Irish boxer.

Then he was just 18, tough and gritty, with a salesman's silver tongue and not much else.

Over five decades, he carved out a glamorous, globetrotting lifestyle – starting with a suburban delicatessen before moving on to selling cars and ultimately becoming one of Perth's most colourful restaurateurs.

His string of high-end eateries began with Jessica's at the Hyatt (named after his third child) and at one stage included Fremantle's Esplanade Hotel, before his trademark red, black and white logos seemed to be everywhere offering

cheap oysters at fashionable restaurants in idyllic locations. For a self-confessed yobbo – albeit "an upmarket one" who's a "good spender" – he was the enigmatic man of the moment.

At the height of his popularity, when he wasn't entertaining Perth's A-listers, he was zipping around on his 27m luxury charter boat Moonlight Lady, watching his part-owned racehorse Black Tom win, consecutively romancing the six mothers of his children and publishing his own quarterly glossy magazine, *Mead Living*.

But exactly one year ago along came the knockout punch that few, least of all Mead, saw coming. Receivers were appointed to sell his three restaurants – The Oyster Bar in South Perth, West Perth lunchtime haunt Black Tom's Bar and Mead's Mosman Bay.

St George Bank ordered the sale of Moonlight Express to recoup a multi-million-dollar debt and by March this year he was forced to hand over the keys to his house in Briggs St, Mosman Park. Almost overnight he found himself sleeping in his office after he was turfed out of his riverside home.

And now – just like it was all a bad dream – he's popped up in Bali where he's playing >>



MEAD AND HIS SIXTH WIFE, KIM BOYD.



LINDA ROSS, WIFE NO. 5.

the perfect host in a tropical paradise as he welcomes STM into his world to talk about his life, his loves, his regrets and his future.

It all sounds like a novel as he talks about where he went wrong with the women, which ones he was monogamous with and which ones he should have married. Even he laughs at his own comments, such as "I can't remember which wife it was that I first came to Bali with..." or "I should have married that one, but I married her sister instead". And "Um, I can't remember how old that one is (child) ... you tend to lose track of their ages". Even he is not sure how many wives he's had. "Five or six, whatever," he says.

He sees the humour, but finds it hard to accept the interest in his life, calling himself a knock-about guy who just does his best, works hard and wants a quiet life, hoping one day to live in a remote spot with a few cows and chickens running around. With the right woman, of course.

"I love women, women love me," he says. "I have lots of women friends – some I have slept with, some I have not. My secret is not to talk too much."

He's working on a juicy autobiographical series that he is writing by hand in his spare time – a rare commodity now that he is working seven days a week. He's already got the titles sorted out: *Going For Broke*, *A Dog is a Man's Best Friend* and *Bankers are Wankers*.

As he sips coffee, he surveys the activity in the serene restaurant where staff are gliding in and out. He might look like a millionaire but is keen to stress that he's paid just \$500 a week, plus accommodation in one of the villas and the use of the company Daihatsu for running errands.

"I don't want people to think I'm sitting up here in the lap of luxury," he says.

"People will start sending me emails asking for the money I owe them. Well, it's gone. You can't pull it out of your bum."

Since Karma Resort's John Spence stepped in late last year with the offer of the job to oversee the refurbishment and reopening of the restaurant at his Jimbaran Bay resort (there's a sister resort, Karma Kandara, at Bukit), Mead has thrown himself into work. He's transformed the restaurant into a clone of his former red, black and white Black Tom's – complete with doo-doo music and his old, trusted menu of freshly caught, simply cooked seafood.

"The only thing that's ever been a howling success of mine is doing the oyster-bar theme, selling them off at cheap prices," he says.

A typical day is spent rising early and going for a swim, either in the ocean at Jimbaran Bay or in the resort pool. Then he heads off to do business at the local markets where he bargains for fresh fish, taking it home and preparing the specials of the day before playing genial host to the lunchtime diners. The day STM visited he circled tables, playing the host to a family of Spanish tourists and some Perth friends who dropped by to try his mud crabs for \$7.50 and oysters, imported from Australia, for \$4 each.

If Spence – the Perth-based entrepreneur who owns luxury properties in Indonesia, Thailand, India and Australia – is his saviour, Mead says he's also a hard taskmaster who expects to see returns for his investment. Mead is hoping his high profile at the renamed Mead's @ Karma restaurant will turn it into a popular haunt for visiting Perthites and a venue for weddings and cooking schools for large groups.

The restaurant, featuring a swimming pool, a baby grand piano, ceiling fans, waitresses in short, red dresses, and a simple menu of steak, oysters and seafood, is in a quiet part of Jimbaran Bay. It's a half hour's drive from the popular tourist strip of Seminyak, but Mead is confident that it will be a success. And so is Spence, who did the deal with him on a handshake.

"John Spence is not a close friend," says Mead. "He was more of a customer. When I ended up down the tube, I was looking for something to do in the interim. I have never really had anyone else come along and say 'I like the way you do this, can you do it for me?'"

In his first job in decades as an employee, Mead is on a huge learning curve.

"I'm used to making my own decisions," he says. "Now I'm in a situation where there are a lot of controls in place – human resources, accounting – things I have never had to consider before. But you never stop learning. I'm not intending to die young. You have to try and adjust to the situation."

On Spence's part, he's happy to have him.

"I have known Warren since I first came to Perth 12 years ago," he says. "We discussed a number of ideas and he did a consultancy for me for a few months and we both agreed that his concept would work very well at Jimbaran. I think a few beers also helped the decision-making process. I think he will not only improve the existing restaurant but also draw a lot of people from Perth who will be on holiday in Bali."

Many of them are already calling in for a glass of Leeuwin Estate, Brookland Valley or Sandalford wine – all on the winelist there.

"Everybody knows where I am, at the end of the day," says Mead. "But I can never quite work out why people are interested in what I'm doing. I'm just a normal person who's bankrupt. What can you do? You just have to do your best."

He said if he hadn't taken the Spence offer he was thinking of doing something at Rottneest with Sandalford Winery owner Peter Prendiville, who took out a 30-year lease on the Quokka Arms hotel last year.

Mead says the support he's had from many movers and shakers of Perth's business community, as well as from his children, aged from 41 down, has been overwhelming.

"I have no money in the bank. I have debt," he says. "A lot of people – about 10 or 12 – gave me money, various amounts. I asked them in some cases. There's probably another 50 people I could ask for cash and they would give it to me."

"I have former business partners who didn't even give me a phone call – people I have known for a long time. But if the boot was on the other foot I would have been the first one there."

"Brian Coppin helped me pay for some school fees for Tessa (daughter, aged 17). People like (Perth businessmen) Bob Branchi and Vern Wheatley helped me out. They stuck by me."

"The only big disappointment was I didn't get a phone call from my former business partner, Ian Love. That was disappointing."

He's sorry, too, for the financial pain he inflicted on suppliers, some of whom were friends.

"Some of them ended up with a \$30,000 debt," he says. "But when you have been dealing with someone for 25 years, you have spent a lot of money with that supplier. They have to take the good with the bad."

He blames his collapse on the boom.

"Maybe I should have worried more about

making a profit than providing a good product," he says. "The biggest mistake I made was to try and get into a corporate situation with charter boats and a vineyard down south. I am not equipped to do something like that.

"I was trying to do too much. The borrowings were too high. Rent was too high. What happened in the last two years with the boom that was happening in Perth was that everyone from a dishwasher to a gravedigger was becoming more money-orientated. I went from paying staff around \$40,000 a year up to \$100,000 a year. That was one of the biggest factors.

"The average profit for an Australian restaurant across the board is less than one per cent. People think you are flying along doing business but there is very little profit.

"That time of my life was just a blur. I couldn't fit any more into my head. Nobody appreciates how hard it is to run a restaurant."

Through all the upbeat humour, he hints occasionally at some ongoing depression, saying that when it gets really bad he resorts to the pool table where he'll stay for hours shooting with his head chef, Belgian-born Yehudi Van Meckeren. Other times he locks himself away cooking oxtail braises and soups to welcome his guests.

He eats little, a legacy of his stomach-stapling surgery, which saw his weight drop by 32kg and left him unable to eat large amounts. "But it is great to immerse yourself in cooking," he says.

being a philanderer. He has fond memories of camping holidays and fishing. He also has fond memories of his mother's brother, Tom Boreham, with whom he spent holidays at Rottneest on family visits to WA, where his mother, Florence, had come from. He eventually named his restaurant after Tom, the lovable larrikin who ran the ablu-tion blocks at the island during his 30-year stay.

The happy childhood memories are soured by the boarding-school experience he endured at King's College in Auckland. He hated it, preferring to fish and chase girls. After leaving school he found work with a shearing team in the south island. When he returned to the family home he was shocked to find his mother had fled.

"She came to Perth with my younger brother, Alan," says Mead. "I followed later after I caught a ship to Melbourne when I was 18."

One of his early jobs in Perth was drilling holes for a tractor firm, where he became foreman.

"I wasn't there that long before I went to Quairading and got a job with a farm equipment company, the owner of which was a seriously successful salesman," he says. "He made me do things I wasn't used to doing like knocking on doors. Within a year I was doing better than anyone else up there. I knew I had that sort of ability to make people feel comfortable. If you persevere long enough you get a sale."

His first business was a delicatessen in Coolbinia that he bought with his first wife, Cherrie,

so, so I just went up to her and said 'I want to ask you something'. She came outside with me and I asked her out to dinner. She said she couldn't go because she had a boyfriend. I just took her hand and put it in my pocket. When she didn't take it away I knew she liked me."

Now that he's 63, he reckons he's worked out some of the mystery of women and says getting involved with anyone under 35 is a mistake.

"From the age of 16 to 21 they just want a ripping time, doing drugs and whatever," he says. "At 22 or 23 they are thinking about getting married and having a couple of kids.

"When they hit 30 they get the seven-year itch and they've got two kids and are thinking 'What more is there to life?' and the first good-looking guy that comes along and asks them for coffee they run off with. By the time they get to 34 or 35 they are thinking of settling down and getting on with their lives.

"I don't care if the next woman I have is 55. That doesn't bother me. It just so happens most of the women in my life have been young and for some unknown reason are attracted to me," he says. "I don't deliberately set out to get young chicks."

These days life is about Karma, the resort where he has been given a new start. The name is not lost on Mead.

"All my life I have had good karma," he says. "Things just started to go wrong in the past couple of years. I have sold six or seven restaurants

MY LIFE WAS JUST A BLUR. I COULDN'T FIT ANY MORE INTO MY HEAD. NOBODY APPRECIATES HOW HARD IT IS TO RUN A RESTAURANT

His eyes mist over when conversation turns to the past, particularly his youngest children, Grace, 9, and Jack, 6 – his children with Kim Boyd, his sixth wife, with whom he split just as things started spiralling out of control.

"The hardest part was being away from my kids, although they have been up here," he says. "Jack is coming up here to go to school for a month. Kim and I are still on good terms.

"It hurt me to pull my kids out of private school. But what can you do? There is no way in the world you can afford to pay school fees and then pay maintenance on top of that."

Another topic that affects him emotionally is discussing Linda Ross, wife No. 5.

He says: "I was monogamous for 10 years with her. It was probably the most tranquil time of my life. After I sold out of the Esplanade Hotel, I had about \$2-3 million in the bank and we went back to New Zealand to the Coromandel Peninsula and bought the house where I grew up. It was derelict and we restored it back to the original.

"Unfortunately, when we divorced I had to sell it. Maybe one of my kids can buy it one day."

It was in that house that he spent what he says was an idyllic childhood, despite his parents having a rocky relationship and his dad, Jack,

a hairdresser whom he had met in Quairading. "The North-West was just opening up with the mining boom and I sent fruit and vegies up there," Mead says.

By the '70s he had his own Toyota dealership in Kalamunda and then, in 1984, he opened his first restaurant, Jessica's at the Hyatt.

At the same time his success with women had become the stuff of local legend.

Says Gary Bryson, a car dealer who knew him through the '70s and '80s: "It had me stumped – the number of young women that have fallen for him. Like everyone, he has his good points and his bad points. He has had more starts than Phar Lap, I know that."

Mead explains that the women in his life all left him, not the other way around.

"It's one of the things people give me a hard time about," he says. "Basically it's because I'm genuinely warm and I can recognise a situation. When I first met Kim she was working at the Vic Hotel (later Black Tom's in Subiaco). She was one of the few waitresses who wasn't afraid of me. I said to my friend: 'I really like that girl. I'm going to get her'.

"She was sitting at the bar with her boyfriend and I waited for him to go to the toilet. He wouldn't

over the years and I have done a whole lot of creative things – and when you do that you expect good things to happen.

"You deserve good karma if you have been a good person. All my life good things happened to me, but the luck ran out."

So, what has he learnt from his mistakes?

"When you look back on your life – I'm 63 now – basically, I'm sure there's things I could have done better. I'm sure it would be nice to have an apartment block in West Perth and a steady income instead of having nothing.

"At the end of the day I have done a lot of things with my life. A lot of people leave nothing. I'm just a bloke doing his best."

Would he do anything differently next time?

"If I had my life all over again I wouldn't do anything differently. It would be nice if I had a different result. I've had lumps of money and I've had none. Money is a bad thing."

And what about the future with his new partner and their plans for a child?

Well, as of now that's all on hold. A week after our meeting, Warren was on the phone from Bali saying: "You know Ica I told you about? We've split up. It just didn't work out."

Welcome to Warren's world.

STM



EATING OUT

WITH GAIL WILLIAMS

williams@SundayTimes.newsLtd.com.au

Bali highs

HOW DO YOU REVIEW a restaurant honestly and undercover when you have just interviewed the manager after whom the restaurant is named? However, STM picture editor Karin Calvert-Borshoff and I were paying customers at Mead's @ Karma and enjoyed what turned out to be a delightful, simple, straightforward – and very messy – seafood lunch.

No frills, no fancy garnishes, no challenges, no clumsy attempts at fusion, no cutting edge.

At Jimbaran Bay, though luxurious and idyllic, is where you see remnants of the Bali of 20 years ago on the palm-fringed shores of the moon-shaped bay.

In this setting, Warren Mead's newly refurbished eatery forms part of the Karma Resort at Jimbaran and he has chosen the ideal site to rise from the ashes of bankruptcy.

Doing it simply and without fuss is the signature culinary tune that Mead's been playing for 25 years.

Throw in Australian oysters at \$4 a pop, a baby grand piano, some attractive waitstaff in red dresses and we could have been at Black Tom's in West Perth, South Perth or

at the old Oyster Bar on the Beach.

I tried a chilli mud crab, one of the daily blackboard specials. And, a word of warning for anyone wanting to sample the sweet delicate meat of a crab (about \$9) doused in chilli sauce. This is a dish where you leave your dignity at the door.

First we slurped down half a dozen Australian oysters – they smelt and tasted fresh – served simply with lemon garnishes and Tabasco.

Karin precisely dissected smoked salmon rosettes and steamed asparagus (about \$12) while I was breaking my teeth on the heavy armour of the two bright red crabs and messing up the pristine white tablecloth with the sauce.

Bali being Bali, the staff rushed forward with soothing wet towels and dignity was soon regained.

The verdict? It was fantastic! The spices worked well, the depths of flavours were punchy and the consistency great. Messy, but great.

Belgian-born chef Yehudi Van Meckeren, who had just come on board, obviously works well with Mead, who has been coaching the local staff in cooking fish simply.

The quality smoked salmon, with a honey mustard dressing, was a standard dish that presented well.



MEAD'S @ KARMA

Other choices on the menu were surf and turf (about \$14), individual shepherd or seafood pies (about \$11) and a slow-braised suckling pig (about \$14) and a Bali-style bouillabaisse (about \$13).

We drank sparkling mineral water, so didn't sample any of the Australian wines on the winelist, and the bill came to about \$66.

Mead is nothing if not tenacious. He has the stubbornness to stick to his guns and make this venue, tucked away off the beaten track, into a success.

STM

➤ MEAD'S @ KARMA

Jimbaran Bay, Bali
PHONE + 62 361 708 800
OPEN: Daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner

LICENSED: Yes

FOOD: ★★★

AMBIENCE: ★★★★★

SERVICE: ★★★★★

DRINKS: ★★★★★

LOVE: Mead's tenacity

LOATHE: Too much colour red

RATING: 14/20

For more food reviews go to

perthnow.com.au

1-4: THE LESS SAID ABOUT THIS THE BETTER 5-9: CONSIDER TAKEAWAY PIZZA INSTEAD 10-12: WORTH A VISIT BUT NO RUSH 13-15: DEFINITELY WORTH A VISIT 16-18: AN ABSOLUTE GEM 19-20: A FOODIE RITE OF PASSAGE

BITES

➤ **FEELING OLD, TIRED** and well aged? The remedy is to drink more wine – old wine – at Harvest's four-course dinner on Wednesday for \$120 a person. Phone Harvest

on 9336 1831 to make a booking.
 ➤ **EMMANUEL MOLLOIS**, the French pastry chef best known for the macaroons he sells at his Choux Café in Swanbourne,

has just published a book featuring all his recipes. Food pictures are by STM picture editor Karin Calvert-Borshoff. Called *Et voilà!*, it is published by Fremantle Press and is in stores now.

➤ **BURGERS ARE NOT** only getting better in Perth, they're getting bigger. For the ultimate 1m-high burger experience try November's Cafe, Bayley St, Dianella. And, along with

the Poor Man's burger and the Fat Boy burger there is the smallest burger of all – the size of a 5c piece, in fact. Big, small or in between, they're all worth checking out.