

Fed up with fine dining, Rockpool chef swaps hats

Neil Perry
Food Living Editor

AFTER 19 years striving to create one of the country's best fine-dining restaurants, Neil Perry is closing it a day.

Rockpool restaurant at The Rocks will close on October 20 and reopen 12 days later as a more casual seafood venue.

The linen tablecloths will give way to bare tables, main courses will start from about \$19 and diners will have the option of a \$10 snack, albeit a gourmet treat such as a Moroccan-style fish burger. The restaurant's name is undecided but it is likely to be Rockpool Fish.

Perry gives a few reasons for the change in direction. He turned 50 in June and is enjoying "a more relaxed attitude" to creating food, flowing from the success of Rockpool Bar and Grill in Melbourne.

He was also bitterly disappointed that Rockpool failed to regain a third hat in the 2007 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*.

"I think it's half a broken heart from that [the third hat] and half just losing the desire to keep doing Rockpool's sort of food," he said. "To be honest, it's a combination of both. Not getting the third hat was enough to push me over the edge."

"I started cooking aged 25 and, from the beginning, I wanted to have a great restaurant. I've been getting up every day and trying to create one of the best restaurants in the country."

"Now, I want a restaurant that has more flexibility for people, one that has something for everyone, whether it's a simple dish or an amazing piece of fish cooked with more complexity."

"When you are younger, you're full of fire but at the moment I'm just enjoying the more relaxed attitude to it all."

"I think people want fun when they eat out and the more flexible you can make it and the more energy you can put into making

the space more entertaining and enjoyable, the better it makes their evening. It's not just focusing on the food."

Operating a fine-dining restaurant was costly, he said. Rockpool seats 110 and employs 48, including 20 chefs.

A \$700,000 refurbishment will go ahead during the 12-day closure. It follows a \$1.6 million revamp a few years ago.

"If we take \$17,000 a night we break even at Rockpool," Perry said. "If we take \$20,000 to \$22,000 we make some money. That's how crazy it is..."

"I just looked at it and thought, 'Am I enjoying doing this? No, not really.'"



Unfulfilled ... Neil Perry says he needs a change. Photo: Sahlan Hayes