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TASTE OF ITALY: Will Cooke, of new city hotspot, Vapiano, and gamberi spinachi, below.

Restaurant branch from the olive tree

NEW CONCEPT

WORDS: WENDY HALL

OPENING Brisbane's first Vapiano restaurant last month was a giant leap from the after-school job at Macca's that was Will Cooke's introduction to the hospitality industry back in the '80s.

After a steady ascent through the ranks at McDonald's – a climb that led him around the world in the global empire's highest ranks – Cooke was ready for a new challenge back home in Brisbane.

Impressed by the Vapiano restaurants he'd visited in Europe, he had set about securing a 12-year development agreement to roll out Vapiano's Australian stores.

The first – a 225-seater on Albert Lane – opened just before Christmas, bringing an altogether new concept to the city's dining scene.

Like the Vapiano restaurants overseas, Brisbane's has a signature living olive tree incorporated into the layout, and potted fresh herbs are placed on the tables daily.

The restaurant serves fresh pasta and pizza, made to order, and includes two bars, a dessert counter and a chip card payment system.

And despite being at the larger end of the scale, the two-storey space is cleverly broken up with alcoves and split levels for a more intimate feel.

Customers are given a chip card when they arrive and everything they order from the counters or bars is added to the card then paid for upon their departure.

"Each person has their own card and a separate bill, or the cards can be handed in together at the end," Cooke said.

The Vapiano team, which includes 75 staff, has sourced local produce for the Italian menu, including buffalo mozzarella from far north Queensland, olive oil from the South Burnett, eggs from the Darling



Downs and fresh produce from Bowen, Bundaberg, Gatton and Logan.

It's already proving popular as a lunch spot, with pizza and pasta dishes starting at \$13, and salads from \$7.

Before embarking on the Vapiano venture, Cooke spent seven years overseas with McDonald's, most recently as chief operating officer with McDonald's Sweden where he oversaw 225 restaurants with a turnover of \$600 million.

His wife Jodie Cooke is now the head of McCafe for Asia and busy with the first McCafe openings in China. The couple have three children.

The Vapiano concept began in Germany in 2002, and is now established in more than 100 locations with another 100 stores in development in the US, Europe and the Middle East.

■ **Vapiano is open from 11 am to 11 pm seven days a week. Visit vapiano.com.au**