

steak business was in decline. The gourmet pizza concept for us was about 14 years old, and people want to eat more healthily, with more variety. The atmosphere in this area hadn't changed, we weren't getting any late-night dining, and the lighting was terrible.

"We were worried what our core business was; was it cook-your-own? What would happen if we changed? Our original concept was to still have cook-your-own, and video screens with someone like Neil Perry doing a how-to clip. But that's not changing our business, just doing it a little different.

"And if we moved, which way do we go? What's in vogue changes so quickly. In the 90s our bottom bar had all the neon signs: Corona, Fosters, everything was neon. It was all old-world brass and glass. Then everything changed, with more streamlined classic lines, and sterile look.

"So many bars are becoming Americanised here, so I wanted to go look in America. Paul had an ad in *Hotelier* magazine, and I emailed him and said 'my name's Andrew Thomas, I'm going over to America to LA, Las Vegas, San Francisco, have you got anything you think I should have a look at?'

"Paul rattled off a list, and I had a look at all these places. I thought I'd better take him to lunch or dinner to say thank you; when you talk to Paul about beer, wine and food, he just starts salivating. Certainly he can design, but he's *passionate* about food and the whole concept. With other great interior designers we've used it's been more about the design rather than the whole concept. I said 'we might have a job going here at The Oaks, if you want to pitch for it.'

"For The Oaks we intentionally went the whole way around anything that was currently cool," said Paul Kelly. "Industrial, retro, old-world finishes, second-hand furniture – we skirted around all that because that's not what this place will ever be about. It's a destination, not all about 'wow'. People come here from around Australia, as a benchmark.

"One of the main design elements of this [renovated] room is that you feel instantly comfortable. It's about breaking it up, feeling more intimate. The lighting and acoustics are a big thing, Andrew was very adamant about that. There're elements here that everyone can associate with: the ribbed banquettes – classic French bistro; the carpet; the bulb lighting; the steel framing; the 1830s hand-drawn artwork on the walls. It's been here for a long time, it's solid as hell, it will be here for a long time. This isn't a fitout that's got a seven year turn-around, it could be here 20 years."

