



From above: The Little Nell Residences; Elle Macpherson, a Little Nell regular; Simon Chen.

Atop the Rockies

Simon Chen has tips on Aspen's best runs and coffee and how his hotel will keep its 10 stars.

STORY FIONA CARRUTHERS

After more than 20 years managing glamorous US hotels, including Rancho Valencia, The Peaks Resort and Spa, Beaver Creek Lodge and El Monte Sagrado, Simon Chen is one of Australia's most respected exports. Four years ago he moved to Aspen's The Little Nell with his American family to take up his post as managing director. The bespoke luxury hotel has just won a coveted 10 stars in the *Forbes* Travel Guide awards – one of only 115 US hotels.



TRIP EXTRAS



I never leave home without my Bose Noise Cancelling headphones.



Hidden notes from my wife and kids. They never cease to surprise me.

Where do you live?

Willits, about 20 minutes outside Aspen. It is full of locals, so things are more relaxed. I love living there because I get winter a little shorter and summer a little longer – great when you have a young family and three dogs.

Favourite place for coffee in Aspen?

Victoria's – [Australian expat proprietor] John Beatty and his team make one of the best flat whites in town.

Aspen's greatest spots only the locals know?

The back of Aspen mountain. Our bar regulars are all in their 70s now and they tell me about Aspen in the 1970s and '80s. They have told me about adventures on the snowcats off the back side of Aspen Mountain. They would be skiing knee- to waist-deep powder and end the day with a great lunch and wine – each skier had to bring a great bottle; if you brought just an

everyday bottle, you weren't invited back. That got me thinking of how to recreate this for our guests. Now every Friday, I take [just] 10 guests powder skiing. We take the gondola up and jump straight on a snowcat. It is pretty special. After two miles (three kilometres) of untracked vertical snow, we go to our private cabin and serve a gourmet lunch with cuvée wines our master sommelier, Carlton McCoy, selected for The Little Nell. To top it all off, we have a therapist to massage away any sore muscles from the skiing. It is a perfect day!

Differences between the US and Australia?

Living here is great, everything is much more affordable than back in Sydney. The biggest differences in my professional life relate to the quality of hotels. The product, service and experience is more evolved here.

TWO MILES OF UNTRACKED POWDER, THEN A GOURMET LUNCH AND CUVÉE WINES.

What do you prioritise to keep your edge?

I always tell my team if we are not consistently improving, we will get surpassed. We retrain our entire team a minimum of twice a year, no matter how long they have been at the hotel. We are fastidious when we recruit and I interview every employee ... Most important, we try to have fun.

Your favourite runs?

I have three favourite runs here. The first is Garmisch in the Steeplechase area – long, steep and full of moguls. Next is on Ajax. After a long day of skiing I tend to steer away from Copper and Spar and take Ruthie's; it is a great run to just lean the skis over and carve without having to worry about the crowds. Finally, if I am in Snowmass, I love Showcase on the High Alpine lift. High Alpine is a slower two-seat lift, so it keeps most people away from this black diamond area, which means less traffic and more powder for me.

Fiona Carruthers edits The Sophisticated Traveller. Its next issue will be in The Australian Financial Review on May 22.