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WIN

INDULGENCE AT  
SPICERS CLOVELLY ESTATE

BAKING IN LOVE  
VALENTINE'S DAY TREATS

WILLIAM BARTON  
DESERT STARS

GILT COMPLEX  
SYDNEY IN STYLE

A close-up photograph of a baby's face and torso, held gently in the cupped hands of a man. The baby has light skin and blue eyes, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The man's hands are large and dark-skinned, providing a strong contrast to the baby's delicate features. The background is dark and out of focus.

hands-on  
dads

EXPECTANT FATHERS  
EMBRACE CHILDBIRTH





**C**hildbirth can be a stressful experience – for women too. Like many men, I had a difficult pregnancy. I recall being totally exhausted when our son Hamish was finally born – after an 18-hour labour – early in the afternoon of July 21, 2000. My wife, Sandra, was fine.

I might have been a bit better equipped for the experience had I attended a session of Beer + Bubs. Now don't get too excited, dads, this is not an excuse to go drinking with your newborn in tow. Beer + Bubs is, rather, a uniquely Aussie way of learning how to be a better, more informed partner during pregnancy and childbirth.

Sydney childbirth educator and mother-of-three Lucy Perry started Beer + Bubs – two-hour information sessions held in pubs – in 2004 and brought the concept to Brisbane late last year.

"The pub provides men with a familiar environment in which to learn something new and unfamiliar," Lucy says. "We have a meal and a drink. It offers a casual atmosphere where expectant fathers are willing to ask the questions they may have hesitated to ask in hospital antenatal classes. Every week, 5000 men in Australia find out they are going to be dads so there's a constant supply of customers."

The sessions aren't held in public bars, of course, but usually in function rooms where drinking is entirely optional. "We've only ever had one person get a bit drunk," Lucy says. "I think he was overwhelmed. Generally, men are driving so only have one or two light beers."

Lucy started Beer + Bubs at a hotel in Killara

in Sydney's north. "When men first came along they reminded me of bunnies in the headlights," she says. "They all looked a bit stunned but they seemed to enjoy it and wanted more information. After the sessions they'd ask me: 'Where's the book?'"

*Cheers to Childbirth* (Pure Publishing) came out last year. It sells for \$25 at the Brisbane sessions, which cost \$50 and are held at the Murrumba Downs Tavern in Brisbane's north (the next is on Feb 28), with an inner-city venue also to be announced soon.

Child health nurse Sharon Armstrong is the local presenter and I gingerly accepted an invitation to attend one of her sessions. My reluctance was based on a traumatic experience of antenatal classes. As I'm a bit squeamish, the childbirth video sent me running from the room. I couldn't even handle watching an ultrasound.

Beer + Bubs evenings are less confronting. At the session I attended, apprentice diesel fitter Mick Lawler, 26, and his partner Holly Byth, 20, of Tingalpa, returned triumphantly with baby Jackson, then two weeks old. Mick had attended one of the first Brisbane Beer + Bubs nights and says he was empowered by the experience.

"It gave me confidence," Mick says. "Halfway through Jackson's birth the midwife asked, 'Do you want to help with the delivery?' and I said, 'Hell yes'. Attending Beer + Bubs helped prepare me, in terms of what not to do and say when Holly was in labour."



**EMBRACING IT** ... it's baby steps for Jamie Little and Tom Ibbott at a Beer + Bubs session with Sharon Armstrong (**PHOTOGRAPH** • Richard Waugh); father-of-two Gerrard Gosens, with daughter Taylor and dog Anchor, shares his story in *Cheers to Childbirth* as does Mark Occhilupo, with wife Mae and bub Jay

Holly says Mick was able to keep her "cool and mellow".

Michael Caune is a workplace health and safety officer and drove from the Gold Coast to the session after his wife Amie saw the Beer + Bubs website. "I know nothing about babies but I've read Lucy's book and learnt heaps," Michael says. "I've been enjoying this session and the interaction with other blokes. It's like puppy preschool for dads."

Engineer Tom Ibbott of Windsor, a first-time father-to-be at 36, is a graduate of the most recent Beer + Bubs session. He teamed up with his mate Clint Lonie, who had heard about it and was intrigued.

"I've done antenatal classes but this was more casual and it was good to get a bloke's perspective," Tom says. "I learnt a lot, including little things like how much a woman's sense of smell increases during labour. I didn't know that but I know everything now. Two hours and I'm an expert." Whether his wife Chloe agrees, only time will tell.

Sharon Armstrong says the sessions change men's mindsets. "They find out that they really can help," she says. "One of the things I try to do is not medicalise the process too much. I think there's a lack of information about how natural it is. Women have this innate ability to go through this process, but some men can be fearful because they don't know what's going to happen. In a primitive culture, the women would take over but these days dads have to step in and fill that role."

Much of what Sharon teaches is also dealt with in *Cheers to Childbirth*, such as labour pain and how a man can help reduce it, and how fathers can harness the natural hormonal chemistry to help their partner have a faster birth. It is also full of down-to-earth and sometimes inspirational stories about celebrity and regular dads, including boxer Danny Green, radio and TV presenter Adam Spencer and paediatric neurosurgeon Charlie Teo.

Former world champion surfer Mark "Occc" Occhilupo, who lives on the Gold Coast with second wife Mae, shares his experiences of the couple's struggle to have a child. Occc's humour shines through the story of the birth of Jay.

"Mae was kind of angry with me at one point because between contractions she saw me having a go on the happy gas, just to calm my nerves. She wasn't too happy about that."

One of the most moving chapters is on Gerrard Gosens. The 40-year-old special projects manager with Vision Australia is blind but has run marathons, trekked Mount Everest, competed in a tandem surfing championship and appeared on *Dancing with the Stars*.

He and wife Heather, who live in Graceville, have two children – Jordan, 15, and Taylor, 13, who has only four per cent vision. Being a new dad is tough but being a blind one was even tougher.

"I would have enjoyed Beer + Bubs," Gerrard says. "There wasn't nearly enough information around for me, particularly when you consider that 95 per cent of all printed material is inaccessible to blind people. When it came to giving birth, I found that if I kept physical contact with Heather as much as possible, almost wrapped around her, I could feel each contraction and physically support her through it."

Most dads don't have to overcome the hurdles that Gerrard did. Still, childbirth can be daunting for the male of the species but, fear not blokes, Beer + Bubs is here to help.

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