

# The Sydney Morning Herald

National Lunch with

## Mark Ruffalo wanted to make a film about his life. Rob Bilott had to be convinced

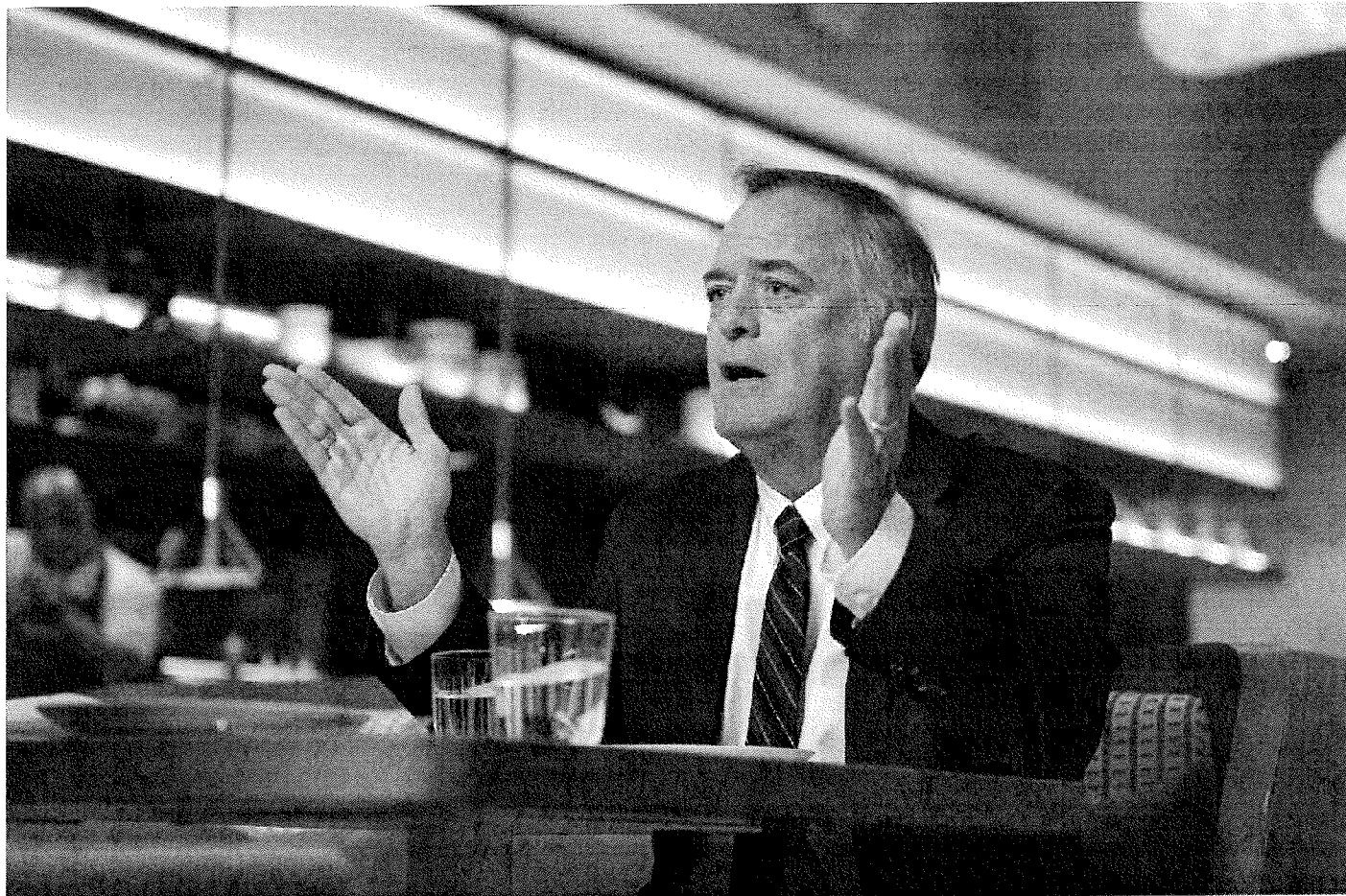


Carrie Fellner

October 18, 2024 – 11.30am

It's any lawyer's worst nightmare. In the midst of a courtroom battle of a lifetime, you are struck down by bouts of uncontrollable shaking and convulsions leaving you unable to speak and on the verge of losing consciousness. The embarrassing episodes strike without warning.

Despite a battery of tests and a revolving door of specialists, the cause of American legal crusader Rob Bilott's health problems remain a mystery. They started in the early 2000s and plague him to this day, although not as severely as they once did.



Rob Bilott was the first chemical industry outsider to discover the extent of 'forever chemical' contamination.  
LOUIE DOUVIS

There's no doubt Bilott has been under incalculable stress. He has led a decades-long campaign to expose the corporate greed and deception that saw the entire planet contaminated with cancer-linked "forever chemicals".

And, while there is no evidence that it has caused his health problems, there is a strange coincidence between the crusade that has shaped his adult life and the likelihood that Bilott himself was heavily exposed as a child to the per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), which are tied to cancer, immune system dysfunction, high cholesterol and a slew of other health problems. When we meet in Sydney on an overcast Wednesday, it's one of my first questions for Bilott. After fighting for decades on behalf of others, how concerned is he about his own exposure?

"It's really sort of hit me that we've probably been exposed in so many different ways," Bilott says.

He says it plays on his mind that significant contamination of the drinking water supplies has been uncovered from the use of firefighting foams at the Wright Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, where he lived as child. But, like us all, it's probable that Bilott is still coming into contact with the chemicals on a daily basis. The federal government advises that all Australians can expect to find PFAS in their blood.

"It's not just coming from foam getting into the drinking water, it's in the rain, it's in all the consumer products," he says. "You've got air emissions, you've got water emissions, you've got soil emissions, you've got contaminated crops, contaminated food."

I meet Bilott at Poetica, an upmarket steakhouse in North Sydney. The dining room is airy and spacious in a palette inspired by “calming sea foam”. It’s an elevator ride from *The Sydney Morning Herald’s* offices but feels a world away from the chaotic hum of the newsroom floor.

It’s been a less convenient journey for Bilott, who has travelled to Australia from his suburban home near the US city of Cincinnati in Ohio, to deliver the keynote address at the Law Society of NSW’s annual conference.



Poetica’s Albacore tuna, artichoke, bottarga. LOUIE DOUVIS

It may be sacrilegious in a steakhouse but neither of us has the appetite for beef. Bilott orders a longfin tuna salad and politely insists I select the main and sides. I settle on a half roast chicken on a bed of polenta, accompanied by creme fraiche spring vegetables and crispy potatoes.

I’m conscious Bilott barely pauses for a mouthful of the succulent dish. He’s modest and introverted but becomes animated as we return to the topic that has dominated his life for the better part of three decades.

“Forever chemicals” – so called because they never break down in the environment and linger for years in human blood – have been found in at least 900 different household products, including clothing, makeup, contact lenses and non-stick cookware. Was there a moment where Bilott threw all his pots and pans away?

“It wasn’t one moment. It was phased in, where we got rid of our carpet, we got rid of things that we at least could identify.



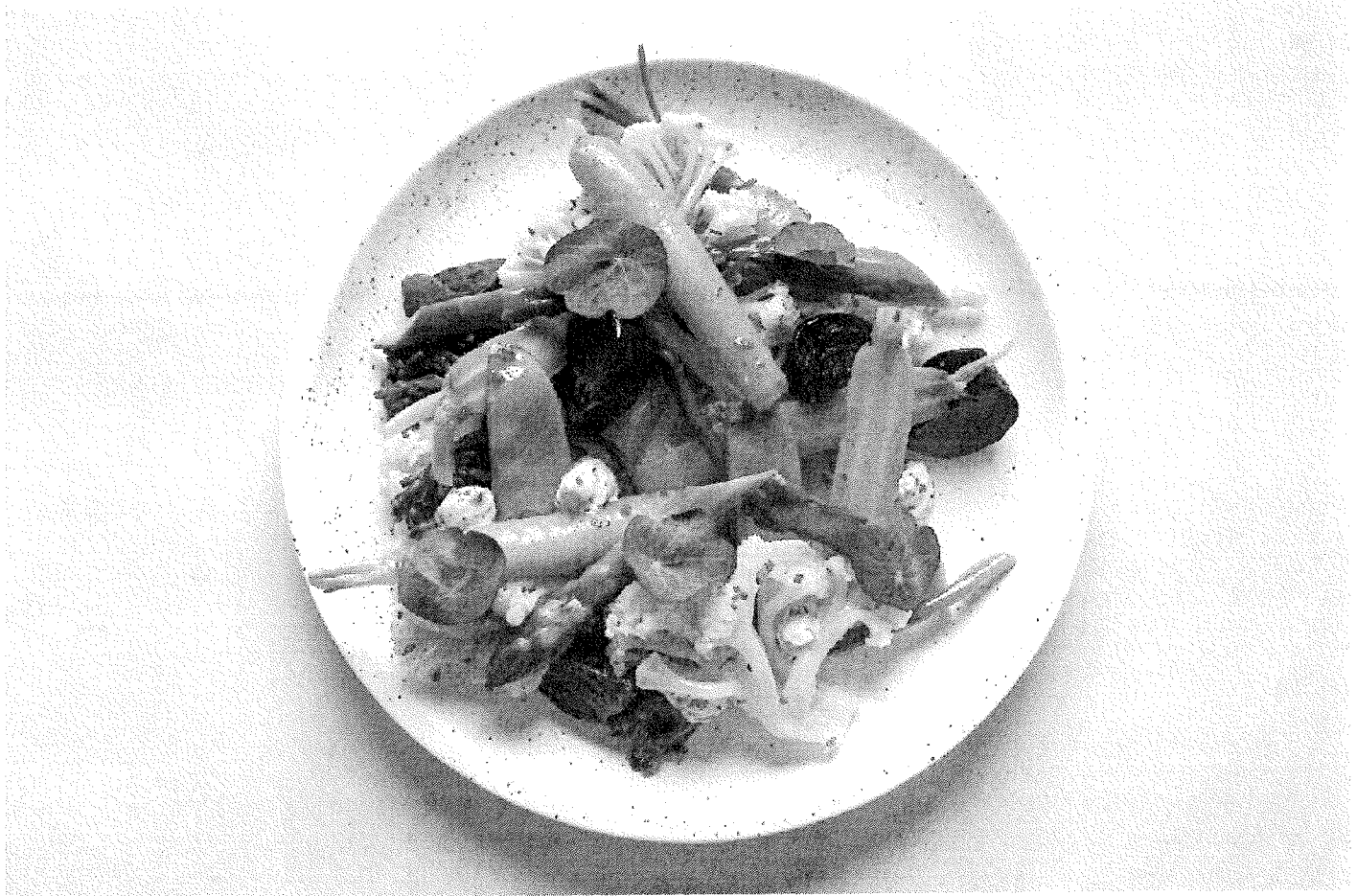
Roast chicken, polenta, and cipollini onion at Poetica. DYLAN COKER

“That’s part of the problem. It’s very difficult to actually identify products to this day ... they’re not on the warning labels.”

While Bilott’s legal crusade originated in an industrial city in West Virginia, its legacy has rippled across the world, including to Australia. Bilott was the first outsider to discover the chemical industry had contaminated all of humankind with PFAS, had known about their hazardous effects for decades and had hidden the problem from the public.

Today governments worldwide are treating PFAS as one of the most pressing public health issues and the World Health Organisation recently declared one of the most notorious forever chemicals carcinogenic. But there were many lonely years where Bilott was practically the sole voice beating this drum.

Bilott’s father, Ray, shaped much of his life trajectory. Bilott senior worked as a navigator and intelligence officer in the US air force and was shuffled between bases throughout the US and Germany with his young family in tow.



Spring vegetables, herb crème fraîche. LOUIE DOUVIS

Communities in the vicinity of such bases are shouldering some of the heaviest pollution burdens because of Defence's use of firefighting foams containing forever chemicals.

After Ray Bilott made a late career pivot and enrolled in law school, Rob decided to follow in his father's wake. "I didn't know what law firms did. My dad was just starting his legal career. He became a city prosecutor, so he wasn't working at a law firm," Bilott recalls.

Having enjoyed a course in environmental law, Bilott accepted an offer to join the environmental group at Cincinnati firm Taft, Stettinius & Hollister, where he works to this day. Ironically, the majority of the firm's clients were large corporations, including several big chemical companies. "We were helping them navigate all the different environmental laws and rules," Bilott says.

When Bilott received a call from a cattle farmer in Parkersburg, West Virginia, who was convinced a landfill run by industrial giant DuPont was poisoning his herd, the case was not exactly the meal ticket most young graduates would jump at. But Bilott felt a sense of obligation to Wilbur Tennant, who was an acquaintance of his grandmother, and sensed the sincerity in the farmer's approach.

Bilott began firing off legal discovery requests to DuPont and his sleuthing through the company's internal files eventually confirmed that Tennant was right. The company had been dumping a lethal substance called perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) in the landfill that was responsible for the scores of dying cattle. The substance was part of the class of chemicals now known as PFAS that were almost unheard of at the time.

Bilott admits he now regrets his initial scepticism that DuPont would behave as it did. "I wish I had understood what he [Tennant] was suggesting a lot sooner because it just took me a long time to really grasp the scope of what was really going on," Bilott recalls.

Not only had PFOA polluted Tennant's farm but it had polluted the water supplies of 70,000 people in West Virginia and Ohio.

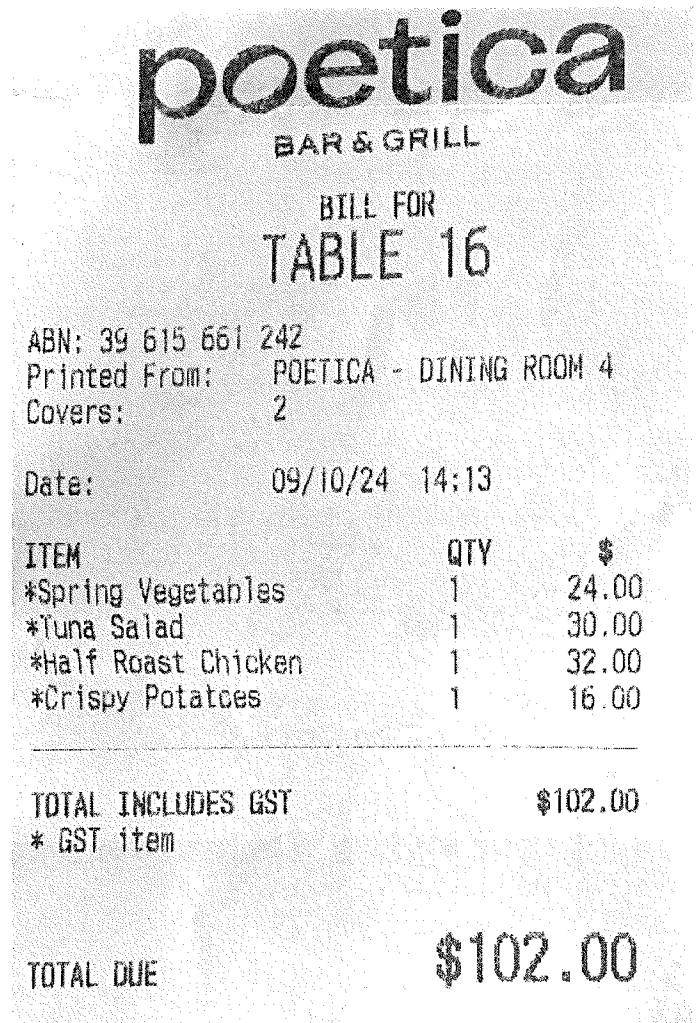
Bilott launched multiple legal cases against DuPont that led to recoveries of over \$US750 million (\$1.1 billion) for those affected in that community. Perhaps even more importantly, the court convened an independent scientific panel that studied the health effects of PFOA, linking it to kidney and testicular cancer, high cholesterol, thyroid disease, pregnancy-induced hypertension and ulcerative colitis.

That was still only the tip of the iceberg. Bilott went on to discover that the PFAS chemicals manufactured by DuPont and another Wall Street giant, 3M Company, had contaminated the blood of 98 per cent of the world's population with PFAS.

Older types of forever chemicals now known to be carcinogenic have been phased out of production but today they have been replaced by a new generation of thousands of kinds of forever chemicals scientists know little about. Early studies are indicating they may be just as hazardous as their predecessors but it will take decades before science can provide a definitive conclusion.

Sitting across from me in a suit and tie, Bilott looks the part of the personal injury lawyer. But he otherwise bears little resemblance to the brash and showy ambulance chasers that the field is perhaps unfairly known for.

He doesn't seem to relish his increasingly public profile, although he admits it has been necessary in getting the forever chemicals story out to the world.



The bill



Mark Ruffalo playing Robert Bilott in *Dark Waters*.

Bilott initially held reservations when he was approached in 2016 by Hollywood actor Mark Ruffalo who wanted to make a film about his life to bring the forever chemicals issue to the mainstream.

“That was difficult and stressful for me to really understand, like is this something we should be doing?” Bilott says. “But it became clear, though, that the public was still being misled. Regulators were still being misled back then. And if there was a way to do something that would help bring clarity and get people to pay attention, then we ought to do it.”

Bilott describes his involvement in the 2019 film, called *Dark Waters*, as a “surreal experience”. This year, he has appeared in the Australian Stan documentary *How to Poison a Planet*, which chronicles the poisoning of the Wreck Bay Aboriginal community and a mammoth legal battle also led by Bilott’s team that has seen 3M agree to pay \$US10.3 billion to clean up forever chemicals contamination across America.

“I think these films are critical to raising public awareness and helping translate issues that are really complex ... to show why this matters to real people.”

But Bilott remains shocked the Australian government’s official PFAS website still states there is “limited to no evidence of human disease or other clinical significant harm” from PFAS, in contrast to the US, Britain, Europe and the World Health Organisation, which all acknowledge health effects.

“Across the border, it’s the same chemical, it’s the same science. So we ought to be learning by using the data that’s been collected the last several decades, and take steps to protect people now based on what we already know, not suggesting that we don’t know enough.”

***Start the day with a summary of the day’s most important and interesting stories, analysis and insights. Sign up for our Morning Edition newsletter.***



Carrie Fellner is an investigative reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).