

Food for Thought: Tables Turn in Melbourne --- The City's Restaurants Have Calmed Down and Grown Up

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Flinders Lane, in the city center, has become a gourmet gully with new places opening up amidst the galleries and boutique hotels that are taking over what was once the seamier side of the business district. Decoy is a bright, small, informal space dominated by a huge old clock that hangs in the center of the room. The restaurant does a busier trade for lunch than dinner, offering a mix of European dishes that make excellent use of the amazing produce available in Australia. A huge plate of antipasto came with grilled vegetables and salad that were a revelation after the tasteless pap too often flown into Asian cities.

Australian restaurants have great service in general with none of the haughtiness of France or Stepford waitron attitude in the United States. The food at Circa is excellent, with the clean, bright tastes that distinguish really thoughtful and careful cooking. The menu is short and fairly simple. Only one word, "tian," threw us, but the waiter explained that essentially it was just a cylinder of something. The something was blue swimmer crab lightly bound with mayonnaise and served with a lacey decoration of intense gazpacho. The best first course was a tuna carpaccio, flavored with sesame oil, daikon, Vietnamese mint and a dark soy sauce. Duck pate comes with walnut parfait and strong peppery overtones. Wild barramundi, a luxuriant white fish, was cooked to a crisp on the outside but juicy inside, an amazing skill in itself. The restaurant excels at fish, but a dish of veal with an amazing intense dark sauce was also perfectly cooked.

Brunswick Street in Fitzroy is another area near the city center that is a good place to troll for a meal. The neighborhood still has a cheerfully scruffy edge to it and most of the cafes and restaurants are cheaper, noisier places than those in the city center. Guernica, a small, cozy restaurant that serves Asian-influenced Mediterranean food is a good place to start. For a cheaper, more informal meal or for breakfast, try Mario's, a cafe that has become a Fitzroy institution for its genuine Italian flavors and friendly service.

FULL TEXT

MELBOURNE -- After the go-go 1990s, Australia's food scene is finally growing up and calming down.

Restaurants no longer feel an urgent need to prove that the country has gotten past a culinary history of meat pies and boiled mutton that can only be called shocking - Australia's favorite word, used with abandon to describe everything from air crashes to cold coffee.

Gone are the days when chefs tried desperately to get at least one ingredient from each Asian cuisine into every dish, including dessert. Now, many restaurants seem to be abundantly confident, particularly those in Melbourne, which, though it might lack Sydney's celebrity glitz, has always regarded itself as the better place to eat. It's now less about flash and more about ingredient-driven, seasonal foods cooked with skill but little fuss.

Sure, there is amazing Asian food to be eaten in Melbourne, but so what? There's great Asian food to be eaten all

across Asia. What Australia has that cannot be so easily found elsewhere in this region is incredible European food, wonderful cafes and a combination of cooking, service and value that I think makes for the best dining around.

The country is yet to be blighted by chain restaurants and cafes with their spirit-sapping uniformity and service that is more about training than thinking. (A colleague - almost two meters tall and not suffering from any obvious gender dysphoria - takes great delight in the chorus of "bonjour madame" with which men and women alike are greeted at Delifrance in Singapore.) Restaurants in Melbourne seem to be still mostly run by their owners and are driven by a mix of real passion for food and of fear of not making it in what is a fearsomely competitive business.

Coming up with a list of places not to miss in Melbourne is tough - there are so many good restaurants. There are three areas of the city, all of them near one another, that offer a wide array of places to eat. And almost all of them are excellent.

Flinders Lane, in the city center, has become a gourmet gully with new places opening up amidst the galleries and boutique hotels that are taking over what was once the seamier side of the business district. Decoy is a bright, small, informal space dominated by a huge old clock that hangs in the center of the room. The restaurant does a busier trade for lunch than dinner, offering a mix of European dishes that make excellent use of the amazing produce available in Australia. A huge plate of antipasto came with grilled vegetables and salad that were a revelation after the tasteless pap too often flown into Asian cities.

Great food only comes with an agricultural hinterland and there are few places more abundant than Australia. Amazingly, this abundance still comes at a reasonable price. The lavish antipasto, a perfectly cooked risotto and two glasses of wine from a short but amenable list came to about A\$35 (US\$18), for which you'd be lucky to get a single glass of wine in many cities.

Next door to Decoy is the organic restaurant Zukini that is gaining an excellent reputation for producing organic fare that is more than just spiritually satisfying. Just down the street is Ezard at Adelphi - located in a trendy hotel - known for its Asian-inflected modern Australian food, like Japanese influenced oyster shooters and five spice duck.

St. Kilda's is another area that emerged from a slightly disreputable past. A seaside neighborhood about 10 minutes from the center, it has a breezy, 1920s charm and a creaking old roller coaster on the waterfront. It once had a large Eastern European population and still has several cafes that serve pastries heavy enough to fuel a winter crossing the steppes. The waterfront area is lined with places of almost every type, from kebab shops to Circa at the Prince, one of the best restaurants in the city.

The Prince was once the epicenter of punk in Melbourne and later home to Australia's answer to grunge. So it's not the place you'd expect to find a top restaurant raved over by the critics. The vast pub has been converted into a restaurant and trendy minimalist hotel, but fortunately it hasn't lost all its edge. The ground floor is still a bar and the bands play on, guarded by a bulldog wearing illuminated devil's horns who patrols the sidewalk outside.

Circa has a sleek interior that has updated the art deco building with transparent black draperies and white banquettes. It is staffed by what at first glance look like those fiercely superior unemployed actors in Mao suits that sonambulistically serve food in New York. Actually, at Circa they are all well informed and helpful, creating an informal but well cared for atmosphere.

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thoughtful and careful cooking. The menu is short and fairly simple. Only one word, "tian," threw us, but the waiter explained that essentially it was just a cylinder of something. The something was blue swimmer crab lightly bound with mayonnaise and served with a lacey decoration of intense gazpacho. The best first course was a tuna carpaccio, flavored with sesame oil, daikon, Vietnamese mint and a dark soy sauce. Duck pate comes with walnut parfait and strong peppery overtones. Wild barramundi, a luxuriant white fish, was cooked to a crisp on the outside but juicy inside, an amazing skill in itself. The restaurant excels at fish, but a dish of veal with an amazing intense dark sauce was also perfectly cooked.

The wine list at Circa is extraordinary, from amazingly cheap Australian Rieslings from about A\$30 a bottle up to bottles of Romanee-Conti and Penfolds Grange from A\$600 upwards. The list is extensive and well thought out, offering something for everyone at almost every price.

Brunswick Street in Fitzroy is another area near the city center that is a good place to troll for a meal. The neighborhood still has a cheerfully scruffy edge to it and most of the cafes and restaurants are cheaper, noisier places than those in the city center. Guernica, a small, cozy restaurant that serves Asian-influenced Mediterranean food is a good place to start. For a cheaper, more informal meal or for breakfast, try Mario's, a cafe that has become a Fitzroy institution for its genuine Italian flavors and friendly service.

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

Movable Feast
-- Decoy, 308 Flinders Lane, City, 03-9620-7122
-- Zukini 310 Flinders Lane, City 03-9620-1900
-- Ezard At Adelphi, 187 Flinders Lane, City. 03-9639-6811
-- Circa at the Prince, 2A Acland Street, St. Kilda, 03-9534-5033
-- Guernica 257 Brunswick Street Fitzroy 03-9416-0969
-- Mario's Cafe, 303 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy 03-9417-3343

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