



TERRY DURACK RESTAURANT REVIEW

Talkin' 'bout a new generation

Veteran, baby boomer, Gen X, Gen Y – it's a jungle out there. But what with the vets tucked up in bed with a cup of tea and a biscuit, and Gen X staying home with the kids and paying off the mortgage, restaurants have been the baby boomers' playground for some time.

Boomers (46 to 64 years old), after all, have relatively more disposable income and have learnt to appreciate good food and wine. But, you know, they're also getting old. That means they don't like noisy restaurants and loud music. They're not so big on spice any more. They're more health-conscious. And they get annoyed when they can't make a reservation or read the fine print on a menu.

So along comes Gen Y (16 to eating house, such as the new Duke Bistro, upstairs at The Flinders. Duke shares a number of characteristics with its peer generation, in that it's fun,

challenging, confident and different from what came before. And yes, it's loud and moodily dark. Not only that, it's on the first floor of a pub, up a steep flight of stairs. With no inclinator. How loud a message do you want, boomers?

Twentysomething co-chefs Thomas Lim (ex-Tetsuya's) and Mitchell Orr (ex-Sepia) are tucked away in their kitchen as if at a mate's party, sending out surprise after surprise with cheeky flavour combinations and a fresh eye for presentation.

This is socially interactive food, with lots of small plates, share plates, glasses and pour-over jugs going on. Some dishes are gone-in-a-bite bar food, such as white anchovies on grilled baguette (\$6) and others are unexpected salads.

The cucumber seaweed salad (\$10) is a big serve of cucumber chunks wreathed with bright green ogo seaweed, like a punk mermaid's hair. It's fine if you're a cucumber freak and not if you're



Peer appreciation ... Duke Bistro is having fun above the Flinders Hotel. Photo: Tamara Dean

not. Then along comes a classy little dish that's not even in a dish. Served in a glass tumbler, kingfish gin and tonic (\$18) is a fresh and refreshing mix of curled sashimi-sliced fish casually layered with cucumber ribbons, Hendricks Gin and tonic jelly, and a touch of fizz. It's clever-on-clever; alcoholic, botanical and fresh as a flipper.

Melbourne designer Michael Delaney has kept the original features, windows and balcony of the pub but glammed up the interior with a clubby retro mix of glossy billiard-table-green walls, floral upholstered banquettes, black conical pendant lights and flashes of fire engine red.

The crowd ebbs and flows all evening: a big share table dissolves into three twosomes then ends the night as an all-girler. A zappy service team, headed by Kylie Javier (ex-Bentley Restaurant and Bar), weaves through the tightly packed tables with not a problem in the world.

The two biggest orders are both deep-fried – not sure what that says about Gen Y. They're hysterical, really. Fried chicken wings (\$10) are

Duke

Address First Floor, Flinders Hotel, 63 Flinders Street, Darlinghurst. Phone 9332 3180, dukebistro.com.au
Open Dinner Tue-Sat
Licensed Yes
Cost About \$75 for two, plus drinks

14 / 20

milk" and a mini-bar bottle of Sriracha chilli sauce.

Then there are Tater Tots (\$15), crisp little deep-fried spud-puppies served with edamame, pea shoots and a killer gravy made from rabbit, beef and oxtail. It's sort of crazy but sort of great.

The liquid refreshments team includes a former Australian bartender of the year, Charles Ainsbury. Cocktails are well-made but inconsistent; a Sbagliato (Campari and Punt e Mes with a splash of prosecco, \$14) is more Campari one night, more vermouth the next.

From the stubbornly short wine list, an unwooded 2009 Telmo Rodriguez LZ Tempranillo from Rioja has what it takes to mix it with

A final knickerbocker glory is a knees-up of mango jelly, strawberries, beetroot (yep), meringue and panna cotta ice-cream (\$12).

Thumbs up for the fresh thinking and maverick charm of Duke; now we just need a bit more consistency. A lot of dishes registered as salty, and a tough old chew took the fun out of octopus with wild hop puree (\$8) and pork neck with purple kale, green almonds and bread sauce (\$18).

This is a kitchen cooking for its peers, knowingly having fun with food for a generation bored silly with old-fogey establishments and the status quo. In one sense, it's tribal. In another, it's just timely. You don't have to be a cosmic dude to tire of conventional meat and

THE ONE DISH YOU MUST TRY

Tater tots, Duke gravy, edamame, \$15.

