

good living cover story

Food in the fast lane

Ambitious young chefs are turning their love of American snack food into high-end cuisine, writes **Helen Greenwood**.

At Duke Bistro, where the honky-tonk dining room looks like a dystopic third-class train carriage, Thomas Lim and Mitch Orr double-fry chicken wings after brining and glazing them with soy sauce and maple syrup and dusting them with rice flour.

Over in the meaty hot spot of Porteno, Ben Milgate and Elvis Abrahamowicz have pulled-pork sliders, chilli dogs on a soft steamed bun and fried smoked chicken wings on their bar menu, served upstairs at Gardel's Bar.

At The Dip, Andrew Levins fills nachos with pulled pork, pinto beans, fresh herbs and lime cream. He also slips a hand-made kosher beef hot dog into a custom-made, steamed brioche bun.

Americanisms such as sliders, wings, dogs and pulled pork are second-nature to this new generation of Sydney chefs. They are breaking down culinary barriers with these mini hamburgers, fried chicken wings, hot dogs and slow-smoked barbecued pork from the land of stars and stripes.

'We eat like real people and think like chefs.'

Thomas Lim, Duke Bistro

Smitten with Los Angeles style and Chicago fine dining, these young-gun cooks infuse their love of snack food, finger food and bar food with their classical training. They have a jus gras on the burners and 1990s hip-hop on the speakers.

"People of our age, in their mid-to-late-20s and early-30s, are a fast-food generation," Milgate says.

"This is our comfort food, the type of food we eat after work. We're trying to do it on a better scale. We're running restaurants now and in the kitchens writing menus."

Taking fast food to the next level, they are playing around with ranch dressing, coleslaw milk and fried anything, from chicken to dill pickles, or frickles. Southern American comfort cooking is on the radar and Mexico is appearing as a blimp on the horizon.

They are fans of Roy Choi, the former restaurant chef who came up with the Korean-influenced taco truck. This novel portable food concept has spread from Los Angeles to other American cities and landed him a nomination for *Time* magazine's 100 most influential people list.

They tune in to the exploits of Grant Achatz in Chicago, the man who battled tongue cancer and whose new restaurant, Next, had scalpers offering seats for up to \$US3000 when it opened.

David Chang, the superstar Korean-American chef who has conquered New York and is



Hot source ... (clockwise from above) Mitch Orr and Thomas Lim of Duke Bistro; Ben Milgate and Elvis Abrahamowicz of Porteno; their pulled-pork slider; Duke's double-fried chicken wings. Photos: Marco Del Grande



UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Duke Bistro, Flinders Hotel Darlinghurst
Eathouse Diner Redfern
Gardel's Bar, Porteno Surry Hills
Ms G's Potts Point
Norfolk Hotel Surry Hills
The Dip, Goodgod Small Club City

AMERICAN FAITHFUL

South Restaurant and Blue Plate Bar & Grill Neutral Bay
Jazz City Diner Darlinghurst

heading to Sydney, is their rebel figurehead, admired for his "highbrow training and his lowbrow appetites" that have translated into an expanding restaurant empire.

Lim started cottoning on to the new voices in American cooking about three years ago.

"Certain chefs were reinventing American cuisine, doing the opposite to everyone else," he says, citing Achatz, Chang, Choi and Sean Brock from McCrady's in South Carolina.

"We are doing the same here, trying to reinvent Australian cuisine," Lim, who worked at Tetsuya's, says. "As an apprentice, you get trained that there is one way to do something. You can't skip one step or change one thing. These guys went the opposite way. They had different techniques that people didn't think of before."

"They were breaking away from the general consensus of what food was and how to cook it."

"Being a young chef, it was cool to see other young guys do

completely different stuff and get recognition for it."

Lim says he and his cohort are not just into "dude food", shorthand for American burgers, ribs and "stuff that guys like to tuck into". Inspired by their American heroes, these Australian chefs are restlessly mining their own experience. "We eat like real people and think like chefs," he says.

"It's a natural instinct of a chef to deconstruct a dish and it doesn't matter what you eat, you can get inspiration. People frown on chefs who eat fast food or McDonald's and you know what goes into it but you still enjoy it. You take the ideas and the flavours and make them 10 times better, presenting those artificial flavours on a plate in a different way."

Levins is another chef who is fond of McDonald's and isn't ashamed to say so. For him, it's comfort food, a guilty pleasure and a source of inspiration. It's about

throwing away your fork and eating with your hands.

"I can write essays about the great kinds of crap food I've had from all over the world," Levins says. "I also love real food and try to be as healthy as possible. Good quality ingredients can only make junk food taste better."



A quick guide to changing tastes

Blackened Grilled and charred on a seasoned skillet; a Louisiana technique for poultry, meat and fish.

Bun Must be soft, squishy and slightly sweet, all the better for soaking up those mustard pickles and meat juices.

Creamed corn Corn cooked with cream and sugar.

Dogs Hot dogs, a sausage served in a sliced bun. Preferably a handmade sausage in a custom-made steamed bun (pictured right, from The Dip).

Pulled pork Pork shoulder cooked at low temperature for up to 24 hours by smoking in a barbecue until it falls apart.

Slider A mini hamburger, also known as a bar burger. Aficionados describe it as not just a mini hamburger but a thin beef patty cooked on a hot plate with onions and pickles on top.

Wings Seasoned, crumbed, deep-fried chicken wings. Not to be confused with Buffalo wings, which are fried, uncrumbed and served with a cayenne-based sauce.

