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Young guns blazing

Restaurant **DUKE BISTRO** / Where **Sydney** / Review **John Lethlean**

THE LADY ON THE PLANE IS A MARKETING exec. Eats out. Clients, prospects, dates... the usual stuff. So when talk turns to occupations, she wants to know where I'm eating in Sydney. Now, Duke Bistro is possibly the most talked-about restaurant in town this year, a first-time, above-a-pub, free-form bistro showcase for the youthful vigour of a couple of ex Tetsuya's and Sepia chefs, tattoos, ponytails *et al.* A place I've been trying to get to for months.

The name draws a polite blank. There's little doubt a chasm exists between restaurants that are widely known among the general public and those that insiders – media, PR, hospitality industry, wine trade – chatter about. And Duke, a big hit among the young Twitterati and hangers-on with whom a certain coterie of ambitious Sydney chefs has promoted itself brilliantly, might fall into this latter category.

But it deserves a wider audience. Even with

course, being upstairs, you'd never find it unless you went looking. And it's a chef's space. You can feel it the moment you settle at a banquette and scan a menu that eschews conventions for a series of mid-size dishes intended for sharing. And who, but chefs, open a menu with something called "toast, raisins, whipped pork fat"?

I avoided it like a tax audit. Wrong "Gen". But my goodness, pan-fried radishes, served in a buttery emulsion made with the chefs' own dashi (bonito stock) is a glorious thing, redefining the notion of umami, the so-called fifth basic taste. Add sourdough rolls and... dunk.

You would never call Duke's food Japanese fusion, but Japan certainly informs the approach to food here. Wagyu bresaola, for example, is

brushed with olive and pine bud oil, splodged with ruby grapefruit pieces and egg yolk whipped with English mustard, sprinkled with puffed quinoa grains and garnished with sesame leaf shreds, a shiso family member.

And you can see it with three generous pieces of smoked eel, finished with a saba glaze imparting grapey intensity but with a little soy and mirin adding salt, sugar and a glossy dark colour. Sorta Japanese, but... it's finished with an apple, celery and crisp pancetta lardon "salad".

And, without drawing too long a bow, it comes across with a delightful plate of raw and cooked lightly buttered vegetables (peas and sugar snaps, pencil leeks, baby corn, radish and turnips) with a splodge of avocado puree and a crumbly finishing garnish of salty, crisp kombu.

All terrific.

Undoubtedly, however, the funnest dish at Duke is the "veal shortrib pancake party": a kind of Peking duck homage that sees glossy, sensational maple/tomato braised veal rib meat on the bone served with fried shallot garnish, a side serve of warm crepes, a pot of maple mustard, pickled cucumber and shiso leaves. Put it all together, roll and devour.

Dessert, of course, is pure whimsy. Say, a plate of fresh watermelon topped with a whipped chocolate gel, set with agar, an intriguing and very refreshing result. Or Duke's take on peaches and cream: a combo of fruit macerated in chestnut honey and nebbiolo verjuice, topped with piped Italian meringue, licked by blowtorch.

Watch the sugar rush.

And watch out for these guys. Both have a very bright future. But for now, their brightest move is dumping the mindset of commercial expedience that so often leads to blandness, and committing to a vision of cooking food for the gang they know and understand. It works, but we all benefit.

restaurants@theaustralian.com.au
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DUKE BISTRO