

DINING in CHARACTER

FROM SYDNEY'S GLIMMERING HARBOUR TO SURRY HILLS' PRETTY VICTORIAN TERRACE HOUSES, SYDNEY HAS ALWAYS BEEN AUSTRALIA'S MOST SOPHISTICATED DESTINATION, WITH A FINE DINING SCENE TO MATCH. BUT NOW THE METROPOLIS IS TAKING ITS CUES FROM UPSTART MELBOURNE, PUTTING A CREATIVE TWIST ON ITS FINE DINING SCENE

WORDS | JESSICA GLIDDON



A barbeque might not seem like your typical fine dining meal, but in Sydney today things are being done a bit differently. Porteno is an Argentinean-inspired eatery run by Ben Milgate and Elvis Abrahanowicz, the winners of *Sydney Morning Herald's* Chef of the Year Award 2012.

Between exposed brick walls and wrought iron railings, they create exciting Argentinean gourmet food with a rockabilly sensibility, roasting lamb on an open asado spitfire and carving the meat in front of guests, their tattooed arms exposed. "We're not very cheffy chefs," the pair told *Sydney Morning Herald*. Nevertheless, *Good Food Guide* co-editor Terry Durack noted recently: "These two guys, as much as they're fun, they're hip, they're groovy – they are seriously good cooks."

No top-notch restaurant in Australia can quite escape the eclectic, creative spirit that pervades this continent's cuisine; but its largest city has in the past shirked the more openly eccentric establishments that Melbourne is known for. But today, Sydney is also taking up the mantle and turning out an array of new eateries that embrace the idea of fun, funky and creative fine dining.

Quay, for example, remained the stalwart winner of multiple best restaurant awards in Sydney for years. While subdued in decor, even this most refined of fine dining establishments has a creative chaos underway behind its doors. Each dish is a medley of artistically

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assembled layers, garnished with uniquely Australian flourishes like as local flowers and exotic seafood, such as the sashimi of Corner Inlet rock flathead, Tasmanian trumpeter, salt cured wild oyster cream, black lipped abalone, raw sea cabbage, warrigals and periwinkles.

"There's been a huge change to Sydney's dining scene over the last five years," explains Frank Roberts, Merivale Group restaurants manager, which looks after another of Sydney's more playful eateries, Ms G's.

"The style of dining has shifted to be far less traditional, but the quality across a range of eateries is very impressive." The shift in Sydney's dining scene has been so profound it was even noticed by the international community. "The Sydney dining scene has changed a lot in the last few years – the trend towards more casual, rustic dining is fantastic. Personally, I think it has changed for the better," celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain told *The Age* newspaper recently.



One catalyst injecting an interesting mix of highbrow and lowbrow into the city's dining scene has been Momofuku Seiobo, the first international venture of the beloved American-Korean chef David Chang, which opened in Sydney in 2011. The restaurant has been a "revelation" according to Terry Durack.

"It's brought a new way of running a Sydney restaurant," he said. "Suddenly you don't need tablecloths, you don't need tables anymore. You can sit at the kitchen counter and watch the chef as he prepares your meal. There is no background elevator music; we've got AC/DC. That's what [Chang] has done; he's made fine dining fun... He's made every other chef look at what he's doing and go, 'he's having such a good time, why shouldn't we?'" ⇒

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Innovative yet unpretentious Asian food, added to quirky interiors, makes Ms G's one of Sydney's most exciting eateries; a pea creation by Duke Bistro; Ms G's increasingly high-profile head chef Dan Hong.



CLOCKWISE FROM
ABOVE: A peek inside Duke
Bistro; Nik Hill at Duke Bistro;
dessert at Ms G's.



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It's not easy to make it in the restaurant business in Sydney. Although Australia has escaped relatively unscathed from the global recession, 2012 has certainly been a hard year for the city's restaurants, with big name closures like the Montpellier Public House and Cotton Duck.

Half of all restaurants in Sydney fail in the first three years according to ABC News, and most suffer low profit margins that rarely make more than three percent of turnover. Yet restaurant after restaurant keep opening, threatening to over-saturate the already buzzing dining scene. For the many that remain, standing out in their own way has become all the more important.

The Duke Bistro is one such place; housed in the historic Flinders Hotel building in Darlinghurst, this bistro marries light-hearted, zippy flavours with a mischievous wink towards ye olde English culture (the walls feature portraits of bearded British gentlemen with their heads Photoshopped onto Victorian ladies' bodies). It's precisely their quirky approach that the Duke's chef feels is bringing the restaurant success.

"[We believe in] innovation without excess," explains chef Nik Hill, who became the restaurant's chef after a stint cooking at the



Ledbury in London. "We try to eliminate the frills that scare diners off from a pretentious environment. This keeps the doors open and the diners coming back."

Duke's dishes are gourmet yet playful, such as the white tuna oyster cream verjus, or the lamb shoulder with goat's milk, dried olives and rosemary. "[Duke Bistro is] a casual bistro that tips its hat to fine-dining and always has an open-minded and youthful view with a sense of humour," says Hill. "We would say it fits into the casual dining scene that is developing in Sydney at a rapid rate."

"Certainly Sydney still feels like a champion of fine dining," he continues. "At Duke we take cues from this, but we are providing an experience that is more laid back. We base the menu around the seasons and try to keep things quite natural as much as possible. We like to think of it as bistronomy – a gastro approach to bistro food."

Considering Australia's proximity to mainland Asia, many of Sydney's restaurants display a strong Asian influence, which adds a unique twist to the city's culinary composition.

"Sydney in particular, being so multicultural and diverse in its cuisines, definitely has its own style," says Hill.

While Asian cuisine isn't prominent at Duke Bistro, at Ms G's, it's central. With jars glued to the ceiling serving as lights and Japanese robots decorating the tables, the restaurant offers a playful gesture towards Asian culture. Vietnamese-Australian chef Dan Hong heads up the kitchen, peppering Ms G's dishes with innovative touches from Asian and Australian cuisine, such as the kingfish sashimi served with buttermilk, compressed rhubarb, jalapeno and quinoa.

For both Duke Bistro and Ms G's, the eccentric edge to their dishes comes from a similar place: the inspired personalities of their chefs. "A lot of our own personality goes into all of the elements that make Duke what it is," says Hill. "The décor, music, drinks, service and food are all reflections of what we personally enjoy about dining."

Ms G's is the same. "Basically, it's what the chefs want to eat when they're not working: tasty food that's good value," says Roberts. "Like the Stoner's Delight 2.0 dessert: doughnut ice cream, peanut butter, raspberry jam, candied bacon, potato chips, mars bar slice, and banana fritter."

Ms G's is part of the Merivale complex housed in the former fashion label House of Merivale, so it's incorporating the vision of Merivale's young and dynamic CEO, Justin Hemmes. "At Ms G's, there's really no boundaries with the food," says Roberts. "The guys in the kitchen have fun with the menu and that shows in the food, service and experience guests have."

This kind of synergy also helps give Duke Bistro its unique ambiance. "The aesthetic and menu have a symbiotic relationship," says Hill. "They act together to collectively form our quirky, left-of-centre and always evolving vibe."

But this is not to say the feeling of the restaurant was a deliberate effort to appeal to a trendy look and feel, but rather a reflection of taste. "We weren't consciously choosing to have that approach; it just played itself out," Hill says. "The space we had was amazing to work with so we just did what felt right."

Perhaps this fun, light-hearted approach is simply an aspect of Sydney's personality that was just waiting to break out. One thing's for sure: the Australians always have their own way of doing things. ☺