



Photography Jennifer Soo

A quirky bistro with cool cocktails, an eclectic menu and the vibe of a Manhattan dive bar? Now you're talking **Guy Griffin's** language.

**Dude food? Off the heezy?** Well, that's what they're calling the eats that young-gun chefs Mitch Orr (ex-Sepia) and Thomas Lim (ex-Tetsuya's, see People to Watch, page 41) are sending out at Duke. What tribal language is this? Could the torch be passing to the next generation of chefs? Maybe, maybe not – but what I do know is that there's a new tribe of Sydney drinkers and diners. The ones who are over those goody-two-shoes places with the same look and smell, where the fun and good times left long ago. Cue the Duke.

Duke is upstairs at the new-look Flinders Hotel, a scruffy saloon with a late licence that used to be the last metro stop for the sweaty dance-party crowd. A short walk from Taylor Square, the Flinders takes in a precinct that hosts private accommodation for gentlemen, the Taxi Club and a B&B for gay nudists. The pub is now run by a cool new crew: expat NYC-based restaurateur Nick Mathers; the marketing guru for hipster label Ksubi, Paul Wilson; and Angus Gruzman (Gus Da Hoodrat) and Jaime Doom from DJ collective Bang Gang.

For the Flinders renovation, they've gone for the lived-in look of a Manhattan dive bar: wall-to-wall tat, naughty graffiti, quirky taxidermy, bras hanging from the ceiling, battered punching bags. J.J. Cale is on the soundtrack. One or two staff wear those US-style trucker caps. Upstairs, Duke is more low-key, with polished wooden floors, banquettes and low-slung pool-hall lampshades. In the bistro and tiny bar, the boys offer a menu of flavours that fly at you from all directions.

Tonight, I'm with the Midnight Cowboy and a comely vixen he introduces as "my soul sister". Seems he's finally found a girl who'll let him wear his chaps and packed holster to the supermarket. Duke is all about good cocktails and small, cheap share plates, so we're smashing a round of both as fast as they arrive at our table.

Ironic fast food is how I'd describe the tasty fried chicken wings, coleslaw milk and hot sauce (\$10). Alongside crunchy school prawns, spiced tea butter and shaved kombu (\$6), we're chowing on a witty "witlof tonnato" (witlof, raw yellowfin tuna, mayo, \$12), which is delicious; a piece of fried and breaded rabbit (à la KFC, \$7), which is clunky; and octopus, hops, chilli and orange (\$8), which tastes good but requires some chewing. Accompanying these, three eye-watering cocktails from bar deity Charlie Ainsbury: the Floradora (Beefeater

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gin, raspberries, fresh lime, ginger, club soda, \$16), the Sbagliato (Campari, Punt e Mes vermouth, ice, prosecco, \$14) and the Leaving Tijuana (Blanco tequila, fresh lime, honey, smoked salt, \$16).

It's a night for birthdays, first dates and stylish marrieds with their perfect babies. All around us, prebooked celebrations are in full swing. They get a set menu because small share plates don't suit large groups. I'm eyeballing their strawberry trifle.

The Midnight Cowboy gazes at his tomato, strawberries, burrata and shiso (\$18) as if he's just spotted the sniper on the grassy knoll. Yes, it's confusing but hard to forget – a mini-masterpiece of clean, sweet flavours, interesting textures, contrasting racy acidity and tongue-coating creaminess. My broth of eggs, mushrooms and almonds (\$15) has the intense umami hit of a classic miso soup. The flavours are big in a smoky, intensely lamb-y dish of lamb's belly, cumin, eggplant and pearl onions (\$16).

We're both mesmerised when the soul sister announces, "Boys, this is off the heezy." We think that means she really likes her unconventional knickerbocker glory (mango jelly, strawberries, beetroot meringue, panna cotta ice-cream, \$12).

I'm promising myself that pubs like the Flinders and its raffish bistro will be getting more of my spend this year. Places that are comfortable in their own skin, unposey and way cool. But first I'll need to take a language class. Or should I start with the trucker cap?



**Duke**  
Flinders Hotel,  
63 Flinders Street,  
Darlinghurst.  
Phone: 9332 3180.

Licensed. All major cards.  
Open for dinner,  
Tue-Wed, 7-12ish;  
Thurs, 7-1ish,  
Fri-Sat, 7-2ish.  
All dishes \$6-\$24.

**Above**  
The unconventional  
knickerbocker glory.