



03 Oct 2015
Weekend Australian, Australia



Government of South Australia
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Page 1 of 5

THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN 

October 3-4, 2015

Life



IT MIGHT BE ART,
BUT IS IT DINNER?

Eating out in the age of exhibitionism

FOOD. WINE. GARDENS. FASHION. PROPERTY. MOTORING



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Page 2 of 5



Glass Brasserie at
Hilton Sydney



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Page 3 of 5

It's the era of the challenging restaurant. Are we undervaluing good old fashioned hospitality?

STORY **JOHN LETHLEAN**

Rene Redzepi, Jason Atherton and Heston Blumenthal are here. Ben Shewry is in demand across the world. And on it goes. Australia's creative, contemporary, chef-driven restaurant scene is, to drop a cliché early, punching way above its weight.

Which is great. But where to go when you want to impress a prospective father-in-law? Tell your best friends you're relocating to Botswana? Woo a client with good food and wine? Seduce a new girlfriend with your clever conversation? Where do you go when you just want a nice night out?

Something happened in the past 10 years while the food revolution steamed into our lives, making name-brands of cooks and creating anxiety over "plating up" our dinner. Challenging, niche, occasionally frenetic dining gained a serious foothold in Australia. It was rarely relaxing. Demand for the dining values of the past — mood, respect, ap-

proachability, common sense — hasn't disappeared, but supply seems to be drying up.

Now, before you dismiss this as yet more "grumpy old" nonsense, let me be clear: I like a lot of niche restaurants. Mess with my head, chef — I'm not short of nights out.

But I'm not your typical diner.

Perhaps someone like Bill Pannell is. The West Australian winemaker wrote to *The Weekend Australian* after a recent review of Lume, a particularly extreme Melbourne restaurant I'd recommend fervently, but only to a certain kind.

"Shaved cow's udder! Lamb's blood grissini!! Fermented squid guts!!! Is this stuff intended to be consumed with pleasure or does it represent some sort of gastronomic challenge?" asked Pannell. "I have eaten at most of the top restaurants in France and Italy and never been exposed to this level of culinary exhibitionism."

It's the same with wine. Partly because wine lists are the profit engines of most restaurants, buying a bottle you might recognise is now almost impossible unless you subscribe to *Alquimie* (a niche wine title bought by many hospo types).

So what happens when regular folk get into a restaurant they could only book online (or not book at all) and are informed they can have the 6.30pm slot or the 8.30pm slot, but that, no, they cannot arrive at 7pm or 7.30pm and make a night of it? When they get crazy music, a wild-haired waiter who speaks a different language (and I don't mean literally), who offers a menu featur-

ing "raw kingfish/burnt mandarin/nori charcoal" and a wine list with nothing in their brand/style comfort zone?

Where, as one colleague put it, the occasion is not a meal but "going out for drinks with food on the side"?

You have a market segment old enough to have spending money but young enough to want a connection with the energy of youth. Who want to drink (but wines they know, not something weird the "somm" is pushing at the moment). Want to have fun, but don't want to scream over an insanely loud music system all night.

Has going out to dinner stopped being about you? Has going out to dinner become about them? Well, sometimes, yes.

"They" are the hordes who make up Australia's food, wine, bar and hospitality workforce, and a school of fanatical diners who follow them, many from the worlds of media, PR and food/wine supply. There are a lot of them, and they spend. They are almost their own wholly legitimate market segment, one that makes going out to restaurants something like a sport.

They are a new breed of audience being serviced by a new breed of chef-driven restaurant. Niche restaurants can be du jour or they can be stayers; but they are not crowd-pleasers. Crowd-pleasing restaurants are the Coldplay of eating out: not without merit, but you'll never admit to actually liking them.

And niche restaurants are, unquestionably, a Thing. They call the shots and a lot of their customers don't mind that. But they ignore the majority. The majority who, in the words of one veteran restaurateur, just want a restaurant where they can "drink wine and talk to my friends ... so don't make it hard for me". They want talented people procuring and preparing their food but really couldn't give a fig about the chef's name or their "philosophies".

"I call it the emperor's new clothes," says ex-chef, entrepreneur and veteran of the Sydney food scene Simon Johnson. "I'm sure most people go to a number of those places and, I think, deep down must hate it, but go around telling their friends how amazing it was."

Fact is, the industry has changed and so has the way it makes money. The latest national dining survey by reservations platform Dimmi suggests that two sittings is now common practice for restaurants. "Say goodbye to the much-loved 7.30pm dining slot, Australia," says Dimmi.

"Bookings have decreased between 7-8pm by 9 per cent on 2013-14, while the timeslots either side have both increased."

Dimmi also confirms what most of us already know: that the mobile boom has hit the restaurant world and it's changing our entire dining ex-



perience, from start to finish.

“Aussies are now less planned and more spontaneous when booking restaurants: 32 per cent of bookings are made within 24 hours of dining times, often on-the-go from a mobile device. For the first time in history we are booking restaurants more from mobile than desktop, 52 per cent and 48 per cent respectively.”

But what happens when a restaurant will take only online reservations? How many have given up trying to eat at, say, Momofuku Seiobo in Sydney after several attempts at its infuriating reservations system?

That’s when you need a restaurant run by an owner, not a manager. Just ask Richard Lodge, owner of Lupino Melbourne, who has the latitude to massage reservations and take a gamble based on what he calls “feel” and “instinct”.

“We don’t do the in-by, out-by reservation,” says Lodge. “If I’m fully booked, instead of saying ‘no’ I’ll say I could do an early or a late. You feel the night, trust your instincts. Because I’m the owner, if I make a mistake I can live with it. Managers will find that harder.”

Often, Lodge says, an early reservation table will be “resold” but “you have to take those 7.30 reservations. It’s respect back to the customer. I try and please everyone and I try and please the business. Sometimes, you get it right.”

Call many popular places and play the game by asking for an early table and you’ll be asked to return it by 8.30pm. By 8.40pm, they may well be telling you to relax, they don’t need it — information that would have been more helpful at booking time. But the reality is that for many, neither 6.30pm nor 8.30pm works. It’s the three-bears porridge syndrome, and 7.30pm or thereabouts is just right.

Andy Buchanan, who runs niche Brisbane fine diner Urbane and its bistro sibling Euro, says that in most cases apparently restrictive booking times are more about workflow and being able to serve customers than multiple sittings. “If people start earlier, you manage the table so it can be made available again, but we don’t do the ‘you must be out by’ thing.”

Many, of course, do. And it makes it hard for anyone who wants to make a longer night of it, possibly spending more on wine, where the profit really lies.

Buchanan says the greatest issue for him is a dearth of waiters and staff with a customer-first ethos. “It’s getting harder to find somewhere with no bravado, attitude or ego,” he says. “When I walk into a restaurant and get attitude, it gets my back up straight away.”

The cult of food, wine and bars has created a new class of staff member with extraordinary product knowledge but few interpersonal and service skills, Buchanan says. “There’s a group of

very knowledgeable young staff ... but with a lot of them, a customer walks up to the bar and I’ll have to say to [the staff member], ‘Say hello, please; welcome’. They might know the product but they don’t know customer service.”

Philip Kennedy isn’t so sure. “There are still plenty of good restaurants that offer great hospitality,” says the operator of Melbourne’s Pure South. “I don’t think we should tar all hipster hospitality staff with the same broad brush. I take the view that the current trends in restaurants leaves out two simple elements: comfort and service. That is OK with me. At least young people are dining out, albeit on training wheels.

“These young punters will one day grow up,” Kennedy says, “and they will one day be introduced to a restaurant that does offer comfort and service, and we will blow them away.

“They will say, ‘What have we been missing out on?’ That’s a good thing.”

The key ingredients

SITTINGS

No take-it-or-leave-it stuff. You need a restaurant that will do its best to accommodate a time that suits you and your friends, without suggesting you are only a small part of their business plan for the evening.

BOOKINGS

Eventually, life gets to be about structure. Routines. It means that if you want to catch up with others who have the same restrictions, you need certainty. It’s called a reservation. Restaurants that don’t take them cannot be a consideration for anyone paying a babysitter. Hanging at a bar waiting for a table is sometimes just not an option. Restaurants that don’t take reservations effectively say “no” to a large part of the market.

NOISE

It needs to be appropriate to the menu, the wine list, the service levels. Music needs to come out of a good sound system, regardless of the restaurant. Music and conversation can be highly compatible when the playlist is properly curated. Acoustic panelling or baffles are almost mandatory in most solid buildings.

LIGHTING

Mood is good. Having to use the torch on your phone to read a menu is not.

FOOD

Sometimes you have to wonder: is the chef



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Page 5 of 5

cooking for us or for himself? Or for his mates in the industry? Have the chefs actually sat down here and eaten a meal the way a customer would? Is this food that has been refined or food that is constantly reinvented? A nice night out is rarely about rolling the dice.

WINE

The waiter's job – to read the customer – is often done poorly. Even wine buffs often just want a glass of wine and to relax, not a dialogue on amphorae with a stranger. Then there's the balance of recognisable brands/regions/styles and the knowledge to include less familiar wines to complement them and to explain why they're there. If the explanation is appropriate.

Who fits the bill

VIC

- The European, Melbourne
- Il Bacaro, Melbourne
- Cafe di Stasio
- Luxembourg
- Lupino
- Lau's Family Kitchen
- Pure South
- Donovan's
- Bacash
- Source Dining, Kyneton
- Lake House, Daylesford

NSW

- Sagra
- Guillaume
- Bellevue
- Lucio's
- Glass, Hilton Hotel
- The Bridge Room
- Pilu at Freshwater

ACT

- Aubergine
- Italian & Sons

WA

- Lady of Ro
- Rockpool Bar & Grill
- Must Wine Bar
- Trustee
- Clarke's of Northbeach
- Divido

SA

- Botanic Gardens
- Chianti Classico
- Fino Seppeltsfield
- Windy Point
- Andre's Cucina

QLD

- The Euro
- Nu Nu
- The Fish House
- Wasabi
- Stokehouse Q
- Coast Hervey Bay

TAS

- The Source
- Stillwater

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Online

For our full list of niche v nice restaurants and video of Ciaran Tobin, manager at Keg & Brew, Sydney, defending the hipster diner, go to theaustralian.com.au/life