

— FEBRUARY —

REVIEW

Dining out

This month, we head to Far North Queensland for a tropical dégustation and hit the road to visit Ten Minutes by Tractor in regional Victoria.

Ten Minutes by
Tractor, Vic

↓
p.38





TROP FEAST

Chef Ben Wallace delivers a laidback, tropical Thai-style *dégustation*, writes **ALEXANDRA CARLTON**.

Don't be fooled by the name. Oaks Kitchen and Garden might sound like a thousand non-descript bistros anywhere in Australia, where you could expect a nice piece of fish, an unremarkable steak and something that includes granita for dessert. It's none of these things. What you soon realise, when you bump down the muddy driveway, around 15 minutes south of Port Douglas, and park beneath the groves of foxtail palms, is that you've found yourself in a piece of wild paradise. And there's not a neat little square of Atlantic salmon anywhere in sight.

Co-owner and Lee Ho Fook alumnus Rachael Boon greets you as you walk

towards the corrugated-roofed, open-air pavilion where lunch will be served. Stash your BYO bottles in the outdoor fridge and Boon, work boots on her feet and a chook feather in her hat, guides you and your lunch companions through her rambling permaculture garden. She points out trellises of aerial yams, rosella bushes, galangal and mango trees, encouraging you to taste as you explore. Every now and then she'll pull back a thatch of tangled vines to discover one of her chickens has established a secret cache of eggs.

Once you've nibbled on sweet basil and compared the flavour of a tamarind leaf to its fibrous fruit, you're led

Left: Shan tofu with sweet tamarind. Below: the open-air pavilion at Oaks Kitchen and Garden.

to a set of reclaimed wooden tables to get stuck into whatever Rachael's husband Ben Wallace – ex-Longrain in Melbourne – has been assembling in his outdoor kitchen. There are around seven expertly balanced dishes to this long Thai-centric lunch, plus rice and condiments. You might get a lively smudge of coconut and chilli relish on top of a wedge of cucumber, or a muddle of coral trout, kaffir lime and nahm jim topped with a sprinkle of native green ants, whose friends and family you probably met scurrying over the garden gate just moments before.

Larger plates could be a yellow curry of Shannonvale goat or nuggets of red claw crayfish twirled into a green mango and papaya salad. The stereo blends Father John Misty and Edith Piaf with the busy hum of the rainforest. Tiny yellow sunbirds and electric blue butterflies dart around the Thai Buddhist shrines that bookend Wallace's kitchen and you're encouraged to wander over to the fridge to top up your own wine as much as you like.

You leave feeling that you've spent the day at a mate's laidback tropical garden party – if only we all had mates who could make you feel as welcome and well-fed as this. ●

QUICK LOOK

OAKS KITCHEN AND GARDEN
 Lot 3, 11-13 Nancy Cl, Oaks Beach, Qld
oakskitchenandgarden.com

CHEF Ben Wallace

OPENING HOURS
 Thurs-Sat 1pm (Mar-Nov); 3.30pm (Dec-Feb).

PRICE GUIDE \$\$\$

BOOKINGS Essential – at least six weeks in advance.

VERDICT The rainforest is the room at this Thai-style *dégustation*.





THE DESTINATION
Mornington Peninsula, Vic

A FINE TIME

This fine-dining comeback is a must-visit for its superb menu and impressive wine, writes **MICHAEL HARDEN**.

Trial by fire was just the start. Shortly after chef Adam Sanderson, his CV bristling with names like Noma, Fat Duck and Cutler & Co, took on the kitchen at Ten Minutes by Tractor in 2018, fire chewed through half-a-million dollars' worth of wine and caused enough damage to close the restaurant.

Next came trial by council regulation and rebuilding that meant two years before the restaurant re-opened. A beautiful renovation by Cox Architecture expanded the original 1930s building, decked it out in stone, marble, brass, timber and discreet shades of blue and green, added a private room, new terrace and impressive, purpose-built kitchen. Then came trial number three, the pandemic.

It's shaking your fist at the sky kind of stuff.

Given the steady hum of misfortune, it's remarkable how seamlessly this fine-diner has re-opened, the only ripple on its smooth surface being the business of securing a table. There's no straining to re-establish or refocus. It's already fully there, which is good, given that it's \$165 a head before you spot the wine list.

The clean-lined room, bathed in natural light, nails the elegant casual vibe, the tables well-spaced and attended by staff who know when to be attentive. The wine list is impressive, highlighting the estate's own output against a backdrop of expertly made classic and natural wines from Australia and the world. The four excellent wine-matching options from head sommelier Xavier Vigier are all worth consideration.

Sanderson's food is superb, cherry-picking the best local produce

From far left: Mary's salad, Mossy Willow vegetables with Main Ridge goat's cheese. Below: Lakes Entrance squid, crab, shiso and shellfish cracker. Opposite: the modern dining room at Ten Minutes by Tractor.

and mixing it with stuff sourced within Victorian state boundaries.

Snacks include tiny crumpets topped with glazed lamb tongue and pickled cucumber, tempura-battered brined chicken oysters teamed with a burnt leek emulsion and heavenly duck liver parfait encased in choux pastry.

Larger dishes on the six-course menu are complex but never overloaded. Everything on the plate has a purpose, as with paper-thin sliced squid teamed with crab, shiso, shellfish crackers and a toe-curlingly good fermented tomato water. Same goes with a cloud-like brined and blowtorch-finished proper served with charred broad beans, roasted kelp and tangy Main Ridge goat's whey.

Two desserts might include a Meyer lemon number that successfully melds the lemon with a white chocolate and yuzu cream, lemon myrtle ice-cream and puff pastry.

Ten Minutes by Tractor might be the epitome of strength through adversity. It's also a must-do for fine-dining fans. ●



QUICK LOOK

TEN MINUTES
BY TRACTOR

1333 Mornington-
Flinders Rd,
Main Ridge, Vic
*tenminutesbytractor.
com.au*

CHEF Adam Sanderson

OPENING HOURS
Thurs-Sun noon-4pm;
Fri-Sat 6pm-late

PRICE \$\$\$\$

BOOKINGS
Essential – at least
a month ahead.

VERDICT
Post-fire, Ten Minutes
is revitalised,
locally focused and
impressively precise.





THE REFRESH
Mosman,
NSW



Clockwise from far left: the chef's table; Ormeggio co-owners Anna and Alessandro Pavoni; Tasmanian yellowfin tuna crudo on brioche crostini.



MODA ITALIA

A pescatarian menu and a revamp brings the Amalfi Coast to Sydney's north, writes **KARLIE VERKERK**.

In our current world, a change is as good as a holiday. And while we may not be able to travel to the sun-drenched Mediterranean just yet, we can slip into our finest linen and slink down to D'Albora Marinas for a leisurely waterside lunch at Ormeggio at The Spit.

Post-lockdown, the longstanding Italian fine-diner underwent renovations and resurfaced as a more laidback, "alla moda" version of itself. Less drab, more fab. No meat, all seafood.

Inside, stuffy upholstered armchairs have made way for on-trend rattan and timber ones. Complementing them are vintage Turkish rugs, sheer curtains and a hint of brass. An impressive marble cocktail and gelato bar stretches down one side of the room; behind it, vases decorate a textured stucco wall. The updated space is fresh and fashionable

— a far cry from the original 2010 fit-out.

The dining room isn't the only thing to receive a makeover. In response to an ever-growing trend, chef-owner Alessandro Pavoni shifted the offering to pescatarian, which makes sense for a venue so close to the sea you could dip your toes between courses.

Once you've settled in and sufficiently ogled the luxury vessels moored metres away, order an assaggini (small taste) or two. It could be a plump pasta bottoni (button) floating in delicately smoked eel consommé, its goat's curd filling ready to burst. Or a baton of golden fried brioche crowned with yellowfin tuna and jewel-like roe — a textural treat held together with silken pistachio cream.

Pavoni employs clever cooking techniques so at no point during the meal will you be searching for a wafer

of wagyu or piece of pork. Take the swordfish "porchetta" for example, which sees the fish opened like a book, filled with herbs and capers, then rolled up and cooked until just opaque. Thin slices are served with salsa verde (made à la minute) and topped with crisp fish-skin crackling. It's light and zingy, although an extra glug of olive oil wouldn't go astray.

Larger dishes range from pasta and an impressive mud crab risotto to locally sourced fish, including a fillet of New South Wales Murray cod, which is baked in a salt crust with lemon leaves. The accompanying preserved lemon and macadamia sauce is rich and fatty, much like the fish itself.

The wine list favours Italy with a few Australian and New Zealand favourites thrown in for good measure.

It may not be the Amalfi Coast, but with an Aperol Spritz in one hand and a goblet of gelato in the other, it's darn convincing. ●

QUICK LOOK

ORMEGGIO AT THE SPIT
D'Albora Marinas,
Spit Rd, Mosman, NSW
ormeeggio.com.au

CHEF
Alessandro Pavoni

OPENING HOURS
Wed-Sat 11.30am-3pm
and 5.30pm-10pm;
Sun 11.30am-9pm

PRICE GUIDE \$\$\$

BOOKINGS Required.

VERDICT The longtime favourite feels fresh and fashionable again.



THE CLASSIC

Perth, WA



QUICK LOOK

BALTHAZAR

6 The Esplanade, Perth
balthazar.com.au

CHEF Luke Wakefield

OPENING HOURS

Mon-Fri noon-12am;
 Sat 6pm-12am

PRICE GUIDE \$\$

BOOKINGS

Recommended.

VERDICT

A twenty-something brimming with confidence.

DECO-DENCE

Perth's Balthazar might be a restaurant with old-school ideals, but this polished dining room also has an eye on the now, writes **MAX VEENHUYZEN**.

Spoiler alert: you're going to enjoy yourself at Balthazar. Or at least you will if making reservations and à la carte dining is your idea of fun. In other words: all the things we used to do at restaurants before tasting menus and small plates ("the kitchen will send food as it's ready") took over the dining landscape. Not that dégustations and food-slinging wine bars are bad things, of course. But in an era where establishments often expect guests to fit into their system, finding operators that go the other way can feel novel. Restaurant-craft, however, is nothing new at Balthazar.

Since opening in 1998, Balthazar's clubby atmosphere and spirited Mod-Oz cooking has made it a go-to for business and recreational dining in the CBD. In the four years they've been in command, custodians Emma Ferguson

and Dan Morris have strayed little from the playbook established by founder Nic Trimboli. What they have done, however, is refresh all the things Perth loves about this cosy, Art Deco bolthole. Wine, as it always has been, remains a vital part of the Balthazar experience. But even by Balthazar's lofty standards – the restaurant is a former *GT* wine list of the year winner – its formidable cellar really is something and showcases new-wave locals alongside Champagne, cabernet sauvignon and other favourites.

Luke Wakefield's cooking is a similarly thrilling mix of classic and contemporary. An entrée of dashi-laced raw beef girello – finely diced, not minced – with tuna mayo cleverly reimagines vitello tonnato. Raw scallop and trout, flattened

to translucent white, is Balthazar's contribution to the Make Carpaccio Great Again movement.

The rest of the clipped menu reiterates how technique and an active imagination can make the familiar sparkle anew. Bouncy seafood spaghettini is the seaside pasta of our dreams (the trick, it seems, is emulsifying everything, carbonara-style, with an egg). A reduction of pan juices, grapefruit and Campari equals a fine sauce for juicy duck. Lard in the fryer renders cruller doughnuts – stacked three-high like an Olympic ring tosser's peg – fluffy and crunchy.

Just as confident is the service. Manager Emma Hymus and her crew are an engaging bunch and appear to enjoy themselves almost as much as diners. Having a good time seems to be Balthazar's default setting, regardless of whether you're there to work or play. It's been thrilling Perth for 22 years and I wouldn't be surprised if it continued doing so for decades more to come. After all, time flies when you're having fun. ●

Clockwise from top left: dinner service at Balthazar; the well-stocked wine bar; Balthazar's Art Deco entrance.