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STYLE TRENDS • CONCHITA WURST • JET-SET EVENTS & MORE!

MELBOURNE

by Lawrence Ferber

Sydney may have the iconic Opera House, Mardi Gras glitz, and some celebrity chefs, yet Melbourne can lay claim to Australia's only inclusion on the World's 50 Best Restaurants in the World list—Chef Ben Shewry's avant-garde, farm-to-table hotspot Attica. Melbourne also has the honor of being a repeat title holder of World's Most Livable City.

The dining scene here is simply incredible, thanks in no small part to the bounty of produce and wines resulting from the Victoria region's climate ("four seasons in a day," locals like to say), a burgeoning crop of under-the-radar innovative chefs, a teeming craft-coffee culture, and strong multi-cultural influences.

From Melbourne's downtown (CBD) and its famed, labyrinthine laneways to hipster-hoods Fitzroy and Collingwood, amazing new spots are cropping up everywhere. Openings and reboots are routinely chronicled on chic "what's on" website, **Broadsheet** (www.broadsheet.com.au/melbourne), while annual tome *The Age Good Food Guide* keeps tabs on the best and brightest. A tastings-filled food tour is always a good idea, and the excellent and sassy **Monique Bayer's Walk Melbourne** (www.walkmelbourne.com.au) offers superb three-hour expeditions covering coffee, chocolate, dumplings, rooftop bars, and more from \$53 and up. You can even try some modern-Aussie cuisine from New York or Los Angeles in Qantas' Business Class (www.qantas.com) where the menus are by Neil Perry, whose high-profile Rockpool can be found at Melbourne's Crown casino complex.

Here, we offer a rundown of some current Melbourne musts, include creative Mod Oz venues, and a showcase for exotic aboriginal flavors, and a desert spot with world-class artisanal treats.



Octopus, tarama and squid ink at Estelle Bistro.



Charcoal Lane

CUTLER & CO

The Age Good Food Guide's 2015 City Chef of the Year, Andrew McConnell is one of Melbourne's most prolific native sons. Of his six current venues, which include the CBD's Cumulus Inc. and Builders Arms Hotel in Fitzroy, this six-year-old local favorite is perhaps McConnell's most quintessential must try for its immaculately presented, contemporary Australian cuisine. In fact, 2015 already has seen Cutler & Co. snag the number-five spot on the *Financial Times'* Top 100 Restaurants in Australia list. A spacious former metalwork factory has been jazzed up into a chic yet unpretentious fine dining spot with dangling lights resembling thunderclouds, dark wood, and a coat of white paint from which exposed brick peeks out. À la carte or degustation menus are available, each offering refined, gorgeous creations from both land and sea. For example: a golden broth with shaved abalone, black fungus, and scallop congee; vegetarian-friendly roast turnip with chestnut confit, Jerusalem artichoke, and bread sauce; crisp-skinned fresh flounder with brown butter and pickled onion; and, for those throwing a big party (and possessing deep pockets), a \$163 ¼ suckling pig served with spiced cauliflower, baby cos lettuce, and sour cream dressing. On Sundays, the à la carte menu is replaced by weekly changing family-style lunch at \$55 per person. If you really want a handle on what Melbourne cuisine is about these days, Cutler & Co. should

top your list. 55-57 Gertrude St., Fitzroy. Tel: +61-3-9419-4888. www.cutlerandco.com.au

ESTELLE BISTRO

Located on the upscale Northcote suburb boutique strip, High Street, this four-year-old venue was completely reimagined, redesigned, and scaled down in price in early 2015. A sort of slick industrial feel informs the two-room, open-kitchen space, with leafy foliage punctuating the rear courtyard. Owner/Executive Chef Scott Pickett and Head Chef Josh Pelham play with international flavors in their assortment of tapas, oysters from Australia's coast, charcuterie, and modern-bistro fare, while front of house manager Stuart Neil is a delight to interact with between courses. Musts include the inventive "scotch olives," spiced lamb, deep-fried olives stuffed with feta cheese; red wine-doused John Dory with black rice; and cauliflower and Taleggio risotto. Those curious about what sort of technique-driven creations Pickett dished up prior to Estelle's Bistro-ization can now visit next door's 50-seat prix-fixe-only **ESP**, which opened in July 2015. 243 High St., Northcote. Tel: +61-3-9489-4609. www.estellebistro.com

GREEN PARK DINING

Breakfast is a big thing in Melbourne, and so is bike riding, and people watching. At Green Park Dining, you can soak in all of the above. Opened during October 2014 within a former food hall, this multi-faceted spot (kid-friendly

café/restaurant by day, adult gastrobar by night) fronted by huge windows, sits right along a busy bike path just north of the Fitzroy neighborhood. The evening menu boasts yummy creations and inventive cocktails from Chef Howard Stamp, formerly of Melbourne's beloved tapas institution, MoVida, and co-owner Jesse Gerner of Bomba, which some tapas fans argue is even better. However, you're here for a distinctly Melbourne, delicious brekkie experience, so come in the morning. Menu highlights include a namesake Green Park Breakfast with water bath-cooked 63-degree eggs, thick-cut bacon, sausage, hash browns, and toast; house-smoked trout with soba noodles, miso, wakame, daikon, and cucumber; and avocado with feta, toasted sourdough, herb salad, and olive oil. The coffee and housemade pastry is also superb, plus iced or hot chocolate featuring Melbourne's artisanal Mork brand cocoa. 815 Nicholson St., Carlton. Tel: +61-3-9380-5499. www.greenparkdining.com.au

EASY TIGER

Pan-Asian cuisine is one of Melbourne's dominant culinary trends today (there's a significant Asian population here) with restaurants like Chin Chin, Rice: Papr: Scrs, Supernormal, and Longrain (whose owner/chef, Martin Boetz, is gay) serving up flavors and plates from throughout Asia. Easy Tiger, a cozy spot located in the dining haven of Collingwood, draws heaviest from Thai cuisine, with dashes of Japanese and Chinese for good measure (the interior, with its clean lines and wood, feels especially Japanese). Chef Jarrod Hudson's flavorful arsenal of dishes traverses one-serving street food, like a shiny fresh betel leaf with tea-smoked scallop, coconut, fried shallots, and peanut, and share-worthy mains including slow-cooked pork rib curry with steamed pumpkin and deep-fried holy basil. If you're there for a special occasion, or you're just really hungry, a banquet option inclusive of starters, five mains, and a dessert is available for \$56 or \$71 per person. On Sundays the à la carte menu is replaced by a two or three-course prix-fixe (\$41/\$56) featuring new and experimental dishes (on the night I dined, a monkfish curry was among these). The venue's name reportedly came about when the owners argued over what to call it. "Easy tiger!" one begged as voices rose. And so it went. 96 Smith St., Collingwood. Tel: +61-3-9417-2373. www.easytiger.com

CHARCOAL LANE

While farm to table is the trend, Fitzroy's Charcoal Lane sets itself apart with a focus on sourcing its fare from Australia's bush. We're talking indige-



Charcoal Lane

nous exotica like pill-shaped rainforest *finger limes*, which contain tiny caviar-like pulp; *wattleseed*; and sweet *quandong* aka desert peach. A highlight of a meal here, should you request, is when the chef brings out a tray of these fruit, vegetables, and herbs to see and taste. The seven-year-old Charcoal Lane's devotion to indigenous Oz extends beyond just ingredients. Part of a community-service organization, it employs Aboriginal and at-risk youth, teaching valuable skills under Executive Chef/Horticulturist Greg Hampton. Start off with a cocktail like the Peppercorn Negroni for a first taste of native flavor, then move on to the "Wild Food" appetizer selection. Mains include Saltbush lamb, char-grilled Emu filet, and a Parma ham wrapped Wallaby. It's worth noting that Attica, one of Melbourne's hottest tables, also spotlights indigenous ingredients in haute avant-garde degustation menus. 136 Gertrude St., Fitzroy. Tel: +61-3-9418-3400. www.charcoalane.com.au

LUXEMBOURG

This French wine bar/bistro from Melbourne restaurateur Andrew McConnell (see Cutler & Co.) popped up last summer in the St. Kilda suburb, best known for its namesake beach, on fabulous people-watching strip Fitzroy Street. In fact, the foot traffic alone is reason to come and demand a window or outdoor seat. Neighborhood demographics are mind-bogglingly diverse here and delicious to take in, from Aussie gays fresh from a workout (or walking their dog, or holding hands on a romantic stroll), to hipsters and retirees to kids. Dare I say, the most concentrated gay population I spotted anywhere in Melbourne, LGBT bars aside, was right here during dinner! While excellent Aussie wines occupy some menu real estate, France, Spain, Italy, and other regions are also represented, and the food is decidedly bistro with Spanish touches. Olive oil-slicked beef carpaccio with chili and Ortiz anchovies, flounder à la meuniere, and walnut-

sized crisp potato-skin shells with whipped cod roe and avruga caviar. 2/157 Fitzroy Street, St., Kilda. Tel: +61-3-9525-4488. www.luxembourgbistro.com.au

PASTUSO

After bringing Melbourne a dose of Argentinean cuisine with San Telmo, the same restaurateur team opened a Peruvian venue, Pastuso, in July 2014 with Chef Alejandro Saravia at the helm. Born in Lima, itself a foodie haven today, Saravia has been quite the Peruvian culinary ambassador in Oz (his Sydney restaurant, Morena, opened four years ago), and here he embraces Melbourne's sharing plate and farm-to-table trends. The space, in the CBD's lively ACDC Lane, pops with electricity: colorful Spanish language wall signs, a marble chef's counter, a beautiful wood and bronze bar. Of course, pisco sours are a major draw, and Peruvian staples *tiradito* (a delicate, thinly sliced take on ceviche), beef-heart skewers *antichuchos*, alpaca loin tartare, and dishes culled from Peru's Nikkei Japanese fusion cuisine. However, seasonal seafood and flavors from the sea shine most brightly at Pastuso, making items from the ceviche bar a must. A ceviche with creamy sea urchin sauce, for example, burst with briny ocean intensity, and a swordfish skewer marinated in a delicious, creamy Amarillo sauce and fired up on a charcoal grill proved a meaty, spicy highlight. 19 ACDC Lane. Tel: +61-3-9662-4556. www.pastuso.com.au

SHORTSTOP DONUTS

The CBD's Sutherland Street laneway could well be dubbed "Sugar Row" at this point, thanks to a trio of artisanal sweet tooth spots. **Raw Trader** (10 Sutherland St.), dedicated to yummy raw/vegan/organic desserts; molecular ice cream shop **N2 Extreme Gelato** (18 Sutherland St.); and this one-year-old craft donut and coffee shop. Attaining a ravenous, cult-like status from the get-go (over 16,000 followers joined Shortstop's Instagram account, @shortstopmelb, before they even opened) this is the brainchild of seasoned Melbourne barista Anthony Ivey, who sampled donuts across North America as research. Shortstop's ever-changing selection, which sells out routinely by 4 P.M., if not significantly earlier, might include a maple walnut and brown butter yeast donut, sticky date and gingerbread cake donut, a New Orleans iced coffee cruller ring, and plump, custard-filled Boston cream. Of course, Ivey being a java guru, the coffee is excellent, crafted with beans from Melbourne's Market Lane and other roasters. 2 Sutherland St. www.short-stop.com.au