

THE AUSTRALIAN

Botanic Gardens Restaurant, Adelaide: restaurant review

JOHN LETHLEAN THE AUSTRALIAN APRIL 04, 2015 12:00AM



Classy: Botanic Gardens Restaurant, Adelaide. Picture: Keturah de Klerk Source: News Corp Australia

Hello. Is that sound we hear a sitar? Ravi Shankar on steroids? It seems a little out of place in a dining room where fastidious service, clothed tables, views to the genteel gardens and ladies who lunch are the norm.

And it doesn't last. Like all good playlists, something more congruous comes along. As, indeed, does Paul Baker's food. Of the new chef at this most mannered, lunch-only restaurant, I know little. But for months, friends have urged a visit and indeed, on a humid Friday, push has come to shove. Along an avenue of Moreton Bay figs we trot to an elegant old pavilion where, on arrival, the waiters snap into action like ticket inspectors putting a half-nelson on a fare evader. Time restraints. Kitchen menu. Mineral water. One glass of wine (maybe two). No problem, sit down, we're on it. And are they what?

The Botanic Gardens kitchen menu (\$85) consists of seven courses and before you can say fish-of-the-day, an amuse bouche arrives that puts a flag in the ground for what this joint is about: ambitious, modern food with soul. No copycat stuff. It's a blistered canoe of a rice cracker with mussel custard, a smoked mussel, a jumble of tiny radish batons and a final sprinkling of tuna heart bottarga. I hadn't heard of air-dried tuna heart before. It made perfect, fishy, sense.

At the same time, house-made bread with squid ink and vegetable ash, black as death, comes with house-churned butter. For such a conservative looking space, the food – and the sensibly priced wine list – is very of-the-moment.

The spin is that much of the green produce comes from the Gardens themselves, so seasonality is fundamental. On cue, out pops the “Garden Tomatoes”: late summer green and red, smallish tomatoes, halved, with charred onion, Woodside goat’s curd, sliced radish, black olive paste and a wafer of herb meringue. It’s a gem.

Next is a tranche of gluey/creamy pig’s head and horseradish leaf terrine, studded with cornichon, served with damson plum ketchup, a grilled spring onion and gingerbread crostino. Textbook. Fish? It’s farmed barramundi fillet, crisped one side, with float-away prawn boudin and a mattress of Warrigal greens purée, sprouted beans, green wheat freekeh and chopped hazelnut. Like everything here, a well-judged balance of old school classicism and contemporary ideas.

And the meat course, a small piece of excellent grilled Coorong flank steak and a piece of licorice-braised rib, crisped, is teamed with a glossy, sticky jus, beetroot emulsion and a puree of caramelised garlic, and does the same elegant, sweet/salty dance (discs of smoked mushroom stem don’t particularly work for me).

It reinforces what outstanding value for money this menu is. And there are two very pretty, equally inspired sweet courses to follow. White chocolate mousse with malt and hazelnut crumbs, cumquat curd and meringue, with a citrusy lemon verbena powder, to garnish. A second is built around rosewater-poached rhubarb with similar elements of white chocolate (whipped into a cream), baby vanilla meringues, granola and grilled rose petals.

And it’s time, gentlemen. BGR is all about outstanding cooking and produce, super service, in a dining room that would have your average Sydney restaurant investor speed-dialling his architect. And maybe a music consultant.

Address: Plane Tree Drive, Botanic Gardens, Adelaide

Phone: (08) 8223 3526 Web: botanicgardensrestaurant.com.au

Hours: Lunch Tue-Sun

Typical prices: Two courses \$52; three \$70; kitchen menu \$85

Summary: A genteel surprise package

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Stars (out of five): 4

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