

REVIEWS BY ✦ PAT NOURSE (NSW & QLD) ✦ SAM McCUE (NT) ✦ MICHAEL HARDEN (VIC) ✦ NIGEL HOPKINS (SA) ✦ SUE DYSON & ROGER McSHANE (TAS) ✦ PETER FORRESTAL (WA) ✦ GARETH MEYER (ACT)



Food & wine



NEW SOUTH WALES



Marque

4/5 355 Crown Street, Surry Hills.
(02) 9332 2225. www.marquerestaurant.com.au

The first time *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* honoured Marque with its top rating of three chef's toques, chef Mark Best was typically laconic in his acceptance speech: "What took you so long?"

Accolades are now commonplace for the 10-year-old restaurant – at the last *SMH* ceremony, Best accepted the Restaurant of the Year gong via video. It just goes to show where sticking to your guns can get you.

Where once his idiosyncratic wine list and take-no-prisoners approach to menu writing saw him doing it tough, today dishes such as scampi with the unlikely pairing of lemon curd, vadouvan (the French take on Indian masala), cos and burnt fennel have made him the talk of savvy food tourists around the world. Savvy food tourists back home, meanwhile, relish the exceptional value of the \$45 Friday set-lunch menu.



MARQUE PHOTOGRAPHY: VANESSA LEVIS



RESTAURANTS

Open: lunch Fri, dinner Mon-Sat. Licensed. Set menus \$95-\$150
Marque's Mark Best (left)

If the toque fits

This month's menu of eateries have one thing in common – each has had its excellence recognised and commended. Chef's hats or stars, for prospective diners every one's a winner.

NEW SOUTH WALES Rockpool

107 George Street, The Rocks.
(02) 9252 1888. www.rockpool.com

When you book at Rockpool, the reservations manager as often as not double-checks: "This

is Rockpool, sir, not Rockpool Bar & Grill?" It's easy to think the 20-year-old flagship of Neil Perry's restaurant empire has been eclipsed by its bigger, fancier younger sibling. Yet the original remains the creative engine. *Gourmet Traveller* named it top restaurant in the state

and, taking a look at the dishes head chef Phil Wood has ushered in, it's easy to see why.

From wrapping Burrawong chicken in lotus leaves and the flavours of Sichuan to teaming roasted WA marron with oysters and century egg, this is a kitchen on the leading edge, with a front-of-house package to match.

Open: dinner Tue-Sat. Licensed. Set menus \$145-\$195.

Sepia

201 Sussex Street, Sydney. (02) 9283 1990.
www.sepiarestaurant.com.au

Greek wine. Murray cod. Port Lincoln squid.

Japanese citrus fruits. Such are the seemingly disparate elements that can come into play over the course of a meal at Sepia, yet the cooking here, ultimately, is really about a Japanese-inspired philosophy of harmony and seamlessness. Restaurant & Catering New South Wales named it the top spot in the state in October, the latest in a year filled with raves for the newish establishment. The Japanese influence isn't solely philosophical, either; you can see it in the coolly businesslike polish of the room, not to mention the abalone braised in sake with ginger-scented egg tofu, chestnut

mushrooms, garlic sprouts and rocket flowers. Warm, informed service, along with Rodney Setter's lively wine list, lifts it another notch still.

Open: lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Tue-Sat. Licensed. Mains \$38-\$45.

Lochiel House

1259 Bells Line of Road, Kurrajong Heights.
(02) 4567 7754. www.lochielhouse.com.au

The *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* named Lochiel House its Regional Restaurant of the Year, but we'd like to give it a prize for being the best reason to take Bells

Line of Road next time you're driving through the Blue Mountains. Then again, Tony Milroy's food is probably worth a trip in itself regardless. Consider, if you will, the likes of grass-fed wagyu beef with grated horseradish, chrysanthemum leaves, nori and warm egg yolk. Or coconut jelly, mango and palm sugar decked out with jasmine rice milk sherbet. Throw in the heritage cottage setting, rich in fireplaces and corrugated iron, and the charm is obvious.

Open: lunch Thu-Sun, dinner Thu-Sat. Licensed & BYO. Two courses \$62-\$70, three courses \$78-\$86.

QUEENSLAND

Ortiga

446 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley.
(07) 3852 1155. www.ortiga.com.au

The well-fed scribes at *Gourmet Traveller* called it the nation's best new restaurant and the *Courier Mail* gave it the double whammy of Restaurant of the Year and Chef of the Year (for Pablo Tordesillas). Apart from the serious talent in the kitchen, there has been an investment here in getting things right, whether it's putting together a floor team that's pleasant, efficient and informed, or a wine list that has sparkle as well as depth. Most of all though, it really does come back to the food being damn tasty, whether it's sausage and oysters in the bar over a sherry; almond soup with smoked eel and grapes; or Tordesillas' take on garlic prawns in the restaurant.

Open: dinner Tue-Sun. Licensed. Mains \$17-\$36.

Nu Nu

123 Williams Esplanade, Palm Cove.
(07) 4059 1880. www.nunu.com.au

Reading the Nu Nu menu, you get the impression proprietors Nick Holloway and Jason Rowbottom might be just a little bit silly. Sure, Nu Nu was just named the *Courier Mail's* Regional Restaurant of the Year, but how many of the other contenders offered cocktails such as the Chicky Chicky Chow Chow and the Ohh Yeah? Flick to the food though, and it's clear they've gone troppo only in the best of ways. How does olive-poached barramundi with blood orange, bitter greens and roasted shallots grab you? North Queensland mud crab with dry curry, egg and minced prawn soup? Or how about grilled sweet bananas with coconut sugar caramel and coconut sorbet? We're about ready to get a bit silly ourselves.

Open: breakfast, lunch & dinner daily. Licensed. Mains \$40-\$70.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

Moorish Cafe

37 Knuckey Street, Darwin. (08) 8981 0010.

The 2010 Gold Plate award for Best Informal Dining confirmed what savvy Darwinites already know: Moorish Cafe is the goods, especially for a group. The food is loosely



NORTHERN TERRITORY

↑ Evoov

Skycity Darwin, Gilruth Avenue, The Gardens.
(08) 8943 8888. www.skycitydarwin.com.au

Evoov must be doing something right: it has now won its second Gold Plate Restaurant of the Year award in a row, as well as picking up this year's gongs for Best Fine Dining and Best Hotel Restaurant. It offers an experience worth dressing up for, which is often hard to find in the casual north. The vibe is cool and elegant, and the food and wine support that theme. Expect dishes such as twice-baked goat's cheese souffle with toasted walnut pesto, beetroot grissini and a pear and rocket salad; or lamb rack with slow-cooked lamb shank in sour cream pastry and roasted asparagus topped with labna and sticky fig jus.

Open: lunch Fri, dinner Tue-Sat. Licensed. Degustation \$125 per person. Mains \$30-\$48.

Mediterranean and North African, with an admirable focus on local seafood. If the main meals, which always include a tagine of the day, don't tempt you, there's bound to be a tapas or three to suit – even if you're vegetarian, carb-phobic or allergic. The 30-plus choices include roasted red capsicum and walnut dip; moist, lightly smoked local barramundi with paprika aioli; or pumpkin and feta salad with pomegranate dressing.

Open: breakfast Tue, lunch & dinner Tue-Sat. Licensed. Tapas \$3-\$12. Mains \$27-\$37.

VICTORIA

Attica

74 Glen Eira Road, Ripponlea.
(03) 9530 0111. www.attica.com.au

Even before being one of the four Australian restaurants – and the only Melburnian one – to make San Pellegrino's prestigious World's Best 100 Restaurants list in 2010, Attica wasn't

the easiest place to secure a table. Ben Shewry's meticulously realised, gorgeously plated food, combined with a sharply directed wine list and charming service, always meant Attica's dining room regularly nudged capacity. With this latest gong, even more forward planning is required. However, a trip through Shewry's eight-course degustation menu not only sees patience amply rewarded – snow crab sharing a plate with freeze-dried coconut and horseradish powder, and a potato “cooked in the earth it was grown” combining simplicity and complexity – but the accolades soundly justified.

Open: dinner Tue-Sat. Licensed. Eight-course degustation \$140.

Embrasse

312 Drummond Street, Carlton.
(03) 9347 3312. embrasserestaurant.com.au

Embrasse scored not one but two gongs in

the 2010 Restaurant & Catering Victoria awards, with owner-chef Nic Poelaert winning Chef of the Year and his gem of a modern French restaurant given the nod for Best European Restaurant. There's a lightness of touch and an almost ethereal freshness to Poelaert's cooking, from his use of rare herbs and baby flowers (meticulously placed around artfully plated dishes) through to his cooking philosophy. He eschews heavy sauces in favour of making the purity of the ingredients – smoked and roasted lamb sweetbreads, free-range duck, heirloom vegetables from his garden – the main event. Precise service and a sharply focused wine list that leans towards France underline why Embrasse is raking in the awards.

Open: lunch Thu-Sun, dinner Wed-Sun. Licensed. Mains \$33-\$37.

Scopri

191 Nicholson Street, Carlton.

(03) 9347 8252. www.scopri.com.au

New owners and a change of name saw Carlton institution Arrivederci morph into Scopri last year – and score an award from *The Age Good Food Guide* for Best BYO Restaurant. Certainly the expertly cooked take on classic and modern Italian dishes in these comfortable surrounds would be a good place to bring a treasured bottle of wine, but Scopri's list, particularly its Italian collection,

is no neglected afterthought. Combine all the grapey goodness with a menu that's full of textbook examples of baccala, panzanella salad, bresaola, lasagne (veal, with a hit of fragrant cinnamon) and baba al rhum, and you can imagine this award won't be Scopri's last.

Open: lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat. Licensed & BYO. Mains \$22-\$35.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Chianti Classico

160 Hutt Street, Adelaide. (08) 8232 7955.
www.chianticlassico.com.au

For many of its 25 years, Chianti has been winning awards, but perhaps most telling is for “most popular” in the 2009 Restaurant & Catering SA awards. It's a place where the whole package comes together: good cooking from non-Italian chef Tobias Gush under the eagle eye of a *nonna* or two; attentive service; an excellent wine list with an especially good range of Tuscan reds; and one of Adelaide's best corner locations, with wide, table-lined verandahs. Rather than try to be all things Italian, the owners, Maria and Frank Favaro, have taken it closer to their northern Italian roots with a focus on classic dishes from the Veneto, Toscana and Piemonte regions, typified by the Genovese-style stuffed veal breast or the tagliolini with local blue swimmer crab and chilli. And if the slow-roasted rabbit with pancetta, port and

sage were ever removed from the menu, the regular customers would riot.

Open: breakfast, lunch & dinner daily. Licensed. Mains \$28-\$49

Dhaba at the Spice Kitchen

252 Kensington Road, Leabrook.

(08) 8431 4288. www.spicekitchen.com.au

Adelaide seems to be the Indian restaurant capital of Australia, with three restaurants named Australia's best in successive national awards. The Spice Kitchen, which describes itself as a *dhaba* (Hindi for a casual roadside eatery), is one of the latest, though its claim to fame really started 22 years ago when spice queen Ragini Dey opened what was then an unassuming casual eatery. It won the 2009 Restaurant & Catering award for Best Indian Restaurant in Australia. What really set Ragini's cooking apart was its range with dishes that read like an Indian regional tour guide. The place has glammed up a little over the years, but it still provides essentially unpretentious, almost home-style cooking. Dishes include Hyderabad baked goat kabab; chicken and duck beetroot “chops”; chilli mushroom bhurjee with rice poories; and Kashmiri lamb korma with silver beet and radish greens. Gaining access to Ragini's side table of fruit chutneys and other condiments is essential.

Open: lunch Tue-Fri, dinner daily. Licensed & BYO. Mains \$26-\$40.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ACP SYNDICATION

← Cutler & Co

55-57 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. (03) 9419 4888. cutlerandco.com.au

Anointed by *Gourmet Traveller* as its Restaurant of the Year, Cutler & Co was given the nod not just because it's a unique, beautifully designed space with one of the best chefs in the country, Andrew McConnell, at the helm, but because it injects a welcome sense of playfulness into the dining experience. McConnell's food sets the pace: whimsical, pretty dishes that might team pork with pureed turnip, or blackberries with banana sorbet, in ways that always pack a well-crafted flavour punch. Then there is the floor staff, who work the glam/industrial space with humour and accuracy. Add a playful, slightly eccentric wine list and you get an experience that reminds you how much fun dining out can be.

Open: lunch Fri & Sun, dinner Tue-Sun. Licensed. Mains \$36-\$47.

RESTAURANTS

TASMANIA

THE RED VELVET LOUNGE National awards are rare for Tasmanian restaurants, which makes Steve Cumper's recent award as *Australian Country Style* magazine's Country Chef of the Year a significant achievement. For most of the week, his Red Velvet Lounge is a relaxed country cafe, a hub in the charming village of Cygnet, south of Hobart, but on Friday and Saturday nights Cumper pulls out all stops. Dishes such as bone marrow and pickled tongue, iki jime bar cod with turnip remoulade and salted kingfish fritter, slow-cooked free-range goat with anchovy mayo and, to finish, vanilla yoghurt pannacotta with raspberry jelly, have earned him his national reputation. **Open:** breakfast & lunch daily, dinner Fri-Sat. **Licensed.** Mains \$27-\$30. 24 Mary Street, Cygnet. (03) 6295 0466. theredvelvetlounge.com.au

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Aquarium Chinese

202 Great Eastern Highway, Ascot.
(08) 9478 1868.

The best Chinese in the Restaurant & Catering WA awards 2009 and 2010 is housed in a large, new room with all the comforts of fine dining. There are two sections to the menu – one that caters to Western tastes and a second that offers more exotic dishes: Sichuan duck feet, stewed beef brisket, chilli pepper-fried whitebait. Try the less familiar dishes in one of the "blue" banquets: fresh, crunchy jellyfish is accompanied by thinly sliced five-spices beef; the crisply skinned pan-fried salmon is fishy; the juices of the tender chiu chau stewed duck are soaked up by tofu; the crispy-skinned aquarium chicken boasts delicious moist flesh; and there's enoki mushroom with lettuce to balance the protein. Service is enthusiastic, perhaps chaotically so.

Open: lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Tue-Sun.
Licensed. Mains \$20-\$73.

Divido

170 Scarborough Beach Road,
Mt Hawthorn. (08) 9443 7373.
www.divido.com.au

Jason Jujnovich's small 60-seater has won a coveted star in the *Gourmet Traveller Restaurant Guide* and is ranked third in the west. It's a sensibly tiny menu with five light and fresh starters, three entrees (often risotto or fresh pasta dishes) and four mains from the wood-fired oven. The dishes are produce-based with complexity derived from the interplay of flavours and texture. Surprise

often leads to delight, as with beef carpaccio with pickled cabbage, crostini and gelato parmigiano, or the quail sausage in mushroom and Manjimup black truffles sauce with hand-cut tagliatelle. Regulars need an iron will if they are to resist ordering the wood-roasted duck (again). However, they're unlikely to be disappointed when the alternative is Amelia Park lamb back strap with lentils, beetroot and horseradish.

Open: dinner Mon-Sat. Licensed.
Mains \$35-\$36.

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Pulp Kitchen

Shop 1, Wakefield Gardens, Ainslie.
(02) 6257 4334.

www.pulp-kitchen.com.au


Local scribes attest that suburban dining in the national capital doesn't get better than this, with the *Canberra Times* voting it the city's best restaurant. It's not fine dining – the rough polished-concrete floors, corrugated iron, and aged wooden tables attest that. Instead, Pulp Kitchen has won over hearts and minds with an unabashed dedication to fine bistro cuisine – whether it be a well-aged steak, a heady seafood bisque with saffron aioli to rival the offerings of Marseille, or an intensely flavoured onion soup. For real French cred, try the gently seared calves' liver with onion tart tatin. There is an abundance of French and Italian inspiration to be found on the wine list.

Open: lunch Tue-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat.
Licensed. Mains \$21-\$33

Mezzalira

55 London Circuit, Civic.
(02) 6230 0025. www.mezzalira.com.au

Italian and Sons in Braddon may be generating all the buzz lately, but the Trimboli brothers' flagship Mezzalira also continues to win plaudits (Best Italian Restaurant in the ACT/Southern NSW Restaurant & Catering Awards 2009). The cuisine has kept better pace with the times than the primary-coloured space complete with late-'90s feature walls. Start with the wonderfully soft and salty foccacia, fresh from the wood-fired oven and finished with olive oil and rosemary. The oven also does wonders for a range of meat dishes, such as roasted suckling pig – its richness balanced with pear and sage. If some of the dishes veer towards fine dining, there's safety in a rustic, chunky and powerful hand-cut pork sausage with braised lentils and local truffle. Taleggio, gorgonzola and sottocenere feature in an impressive formaggi selection that offers a worthy alternative to dessert.

Open: lunch Mon-Fri, dinner Mon-Sat.
Licensed. Mains \$35-\$48; pasta \$24-\$32. 



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