

melbourne grapevine

HILARY McNEVIN



THE dining landscape of Melbourne's inner-north is constantly shifting - growing in various directions with new venues hidden down laneways and gelati shops sweetening up the Brunswick stretch of Lygon St. And there's some interesting movement in the south-east of town - an area of the city that had little pep, vim or verve for a while - but is slowly swinging open doors on intelligent, layered offerings. The **400 Gradi** pizzeria empire continues its expansion, but this time its with gelati and not the award-winning pizza that owner **Johnny di Francesco** has become renowned for. The original shop in Melbourne's Brunswick was heralded as the best new "old-school" pizza when it opened about six years ago and since then di Francesco has gone on to open other pizza restaurants in Essendon, Ringwood and at Crown Casino. He's now giving his dining public the choice of dessert, too, with the April opening of **Zero Gradi** just down the road from his original outlet. Try pistachio, salted caramel, chocolate and espresso flavours among a selection that changes with the seasons. It all sits alongside a homage to di Francesco's award-winning margherita pizza and the margherita gelato which is a combination of red sponge soaked in the Italian liqueur strega, zabaglione gelato and a neutral-flavoured gelato coloured with green chlorophyll extract. The ethos of the shop is built on authenticity. "I wanted to produce a gelato in Melbourne that is similar to what you might find in Sicily or in Naples," says di Francesco.

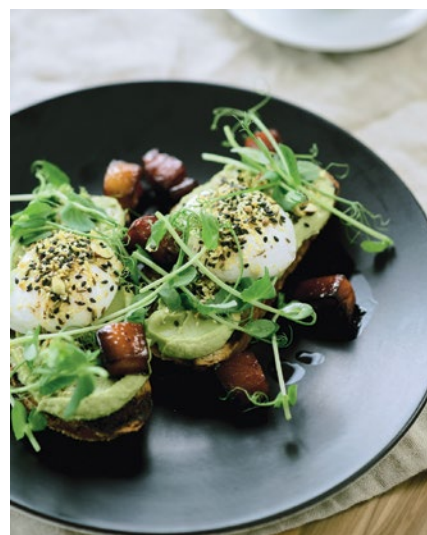
All the gelati is churned daily on the premises using ingredients and in keeping with tradition all the gelati is served with an optional "panna" - whipped cream topping - for an extra \$1. As well as the cold stuff, Zero Gradi will serve granita (lemon and almond flavours), Italian pastries and cakes, and coffee. Shop 1, 93 Lygon St, Brunswick East; phone (03) 9994 5303.

In another part of Brunswick, another new restaurant opened in April. **Host**, by husband-and-wife team Nedim and Majda Rahmanovic, opened its new dining room in a small back street of the inner-north and the name is a nod to what they love to do. "In our group of friends we are always the ones who love having people over, hosting people and we want to extend that here in Brunswick," says Majda. The couple, who are both trained graphic designers, sold their tiny North Melbourne cafe, Twenty & Six in mid-2015 as "we simply wanted to do something different," says Majda and they took on a laneway site on Saxon St. The former warehouse space has been given the Rahmanovic touch - cosy booths framed in timber rest down one side of the long room. While down the other side are a communal and a handful of smaller tables (all the furniture is by Melbourne-based studio Moda Piera), an open kitchen and striking pieces by Sydney-based, New Zealand-born artist Simon Kennedy. It's strikingly modern. The couple has secured head chef **Florian Ribul** who most recently ran the kitchen at the short-lived Enquire Within in South Yarra and has worked good stints at Fitzroy's Hammer & Tong and The Clove Club in London. His brief from the couple was to create a "contemporary Australian menu, that reflects the eclectic nature of Brunswick," says Nedim. The menu has some stayers on it already - the raw beef, oyster and saltbush with linseed, being a case in point. Textural, savoury and silky, it's a keeper as well as braised short ribs with onion, peppers and kohlrabi, and the cobia (Black Kingfish) is a highlight with smoked roe, purple carrots and mustard leaf. The drinks list embraces drops made with minimal intervention, featuring small boutique winemakers and brewers in the succinct selection. 4 Saxon St, Brunswick; phone (03) 9023 5317.



All things to all people is the **Sagra** ethos, but with a heavy Italian accent. The restaurant, wine and food store and rooftop bar opened in 2015, and is wowing the south-eastern suburbs with its modern take on Italian food.

The menu is broadly Italian, there's no focus on one particular region, and the use of the Jospier Oven (a piece of kitchen equipment taking the restaurant world by storm that is basically a wood-fired oven creating an environment to cook caramelised, tender meats and vegetables) at Sagra, is used in a variety of dishes, including grilled pork ribs marinated in balsamic and ginger, a certified Angus tomahawk steak with kohlrabi remoulade or lamb cooked two ways (roasted rack and slow-cooked rump) among other dishes. The dining room is a bright homage to modern Italy; gone are the cliches and nostalgia and embraced is the contemporary and the slick. Check out the dessert bar, the rooftop bar and if you can't settle in, the food and wine store has you covered to take home salumi, antipasti, pasta and a little la dolce vita. 256 Glenferrie Rd, Malvern; phone (03) 9079 5600.



Above left: Sagra restaurant interior.

Above right & below: Food from Sagra restaurant.