



COOL, understated and stylish wine bars are opening throughout Melbourne's inner-city. What's new about that? Well, these dens are owned and operated by some staff with serious industry pedigrees and experience, and all these new players have created menus with quirky, seasonal combinations of ingredients - think pickled mussels with rouille and whole rainbow trout with wild purslane and horseradish - and are creating blurred lines between what defines a bar and a restaurant. Here's a look at a few of the new kids.

Chef **Dave Verheul** and manager **Christian McCabe**, two of the team behind Carlton's The Town Mouse, opened **Embla** in the middle of the CBD last December. A huge wood oven and grill fire up the wine bar's open kitchen and they're used to create Verheul's menu of intelligent dishes to match wines you may not have heard of from McCabe's adventurous and far-flung list. There's roasted broccoli with house-made sunflower miso, and anchovy toast and a roasted chicken that has pundits whispering "best chicken in town" rumours. It's very good. The room is all dark and moody with exposed timber and clever corncicing, brick walls and granite floors, and the 60-seater dining room is dotted with low and high tables. They don't take bookings so you may not have a choice about which seat you get, but one of the best seats in the house is overlooking Verheul and his team at work in the kitchen. 122 Russell St, Melbourne; phone (03) 9654 5923. [embla.com.au](http://embla.com.au).

Chef **Casey Wall** and front-of-house manager **Manu Potoi**, who co-own

Fitzroy's Rockwell & Sons, have teamed up with sommelier **Banjo Harris Plane** and manager **Michael Bascetta**, both formerly at globally renowned restaurant Attica, to open **Bar Liberty**, also in Fitzroy. The new wine bar and eatery is pegged by its owners as being a venue that is an accessible place to eat and drink. In what was previously a tacqueria filled with vivid artwork, there is now a pared-back space with lots of chalky walls, minimalist lighting and timber. Wall's menu is indulgent and edgy, expanding his high-end restaurant muscles - whipped mussels on a crisp potato slice, XO pipis with a solid kick and soft GLT sandwiches (soft white bread holding gribenes - chicken skin instead of bacon - lettuce and tomato). Harris Plane's off-centre drinks list is insightful and makes for great reading (while waiting for friends to arrive). There are two separate dining areas and plans to open out the back in the months to come. 234 Johnston St, Fitzroy; [barliberty.com](http://barliberty.com).

**Marion** is chef and restaurateur **Andrew McConnell's** most recent addition to his stable which includes Meatsmith, The Builder's Arms, SuperNormal, Cumulus Inc and Marion's neighbour, Cutler & Co. The menu is short, sharp and constantly changing depending on season and availability. A snack of mussels and 'nduja or ox tongue mortadella may lead on to grilled porterhouse with a wild weed salad, and the wines and drinks list, by manager **Andrew Joy** and head sommelier **Liam O'Brien** is flexible and interesting, full of dusky craft ciders, Jura chardonnay and Australian makers such as Ochota and Le Stagiaire.



The room is simply dressed - designed by IF Architecture - it's a partitioned horseshoe with painted brickwork, lots of warm wood and black banquettes that are easy to melt into. 53 Gertrude St, Fitzroy; phone (03) 9419 6262.

**Smalls Wine Bar** opened last year in South Melbourne. Owned and operated by media chick, TV personality and clever hospo professional **Jess Ho**, the small space (it's actually named after Ho's drive to have small wine producers on the list) is warm, stylish and smart, with a bar dressed in handmade porcelain tiles, a hidden waiters' station and a choice of bar stools or booth to cosy into. Both the menu and wine list changes regularly but you can usually try the shiraz that Smalls sommelier **Wiremu Andrews** and Ho made last year as part of Wine Baptism of Fire - a competition for amateur winemakers, or perhaps a Domaine de Belliviere '13 Premices Jasnières Chenin Blanc by the glass. The menu is seasonal and the dishes are structured around the wines, perhaps a decadent truffle croque monsieur, mussels in a champagne reduction or oysters with a classic Kilpatrick mix. Ho has designed a space to suit her, her experience and her intelligent approach to food and wine. 20-22 Yarra Place, South Melbourne; [thebigguy@smalls.com.au](mailto:thebigguy@smalls.com.au).

*Above:* Marion restaurant interior & exterior in Fitzroy.