

# sydney grapevine

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IF YOU can think of a more pleasurable combination than the satin-smooth pipes of Ella Fitzgerald and an eight-course Michelin standard menu degustation, you're dreaming. Early last year, chef **Nelly Robinson** shook up the Sydney dining scene by offering a feast for the gods priced at only \$88 at his eponymously-named restaurant - **Nel**. There's no choice, of course, you are entirely in the hands of the talented protege of Nigel Howarth of the multi-starred Northcote Manor in the UK. According to our Finnish waitress, many diners say they are relieved to avoid hard decisions or listen to waitstaff upselling specials.

With exposed brickwork, leather booths and metal piping, the basement location was designed by Guru Projects. Oozing a New York-meets-Stockholm aura, Nel has been feted from the first week by critics and foodies, taking out the People's Choice gong in the 2015 Time Out Food Awards. A Blackburn Rovers supporter, the ebullient and very funny Robinson has been a head chef since he was 22, paying his dues in Sweden and Hong Kong as well as the UK. The one thing he doesn't joke about is his food. The reason why Nel has topped the bill as the number one restaurant on Dimmi, Australia's largest restaurant network.

Poking fun at Gwyneth Paltrow and Chris Martin's breakup announcement, the eight-course tasting menu on the night we dropped by was titled - a conscious coupling. A reference to the eight matching wines which were a steal at \$80. Covering all bases, we had plenty of time to mull over the choices with the opening nibbles of vinegar/parmesan "marshmallows", goma hollandaise with ham and truffled rabbit with rabbit "beer" - one of the best consomes I have ever tasted. Consider: 2014 Jamsheed Harem Le Blanc Plonk Riesling, 2012 Mitchell Semillon, 2014 Monte Tondo Mito Soave, 2014 Louis Jadot Chablis, 2013 Corte Ferro Nero d'Avola, 2012 Domaine de Courbissac, 2013 Vertigo

Riesling and 2012 Don PX, Pedro Ximenez.

Innovation matched with intense flavours are Robinson's forte as you watch each dish being cooked in the open kitchen. The crab, taste of Pimm's, cucumber, strawberry and mint was an homage to spring and the sea. The woman at the next table said that she didn't like mussels but was persuaded to taste mussels, cockles, squid, parsley and garlic - a carefully crafted seafood broth. I'm a convert, she announced to the whole restaurant. Other diners had moved on to an artichoke mousse offset by gruyere, spring vegetables and hazelnut. Showing his Lancashire roots refined to the max, Robinson's central meat course was lamb "hotpot", oyster, pickle, carrot and potato whose earthiness matched the accompanying Sicilian wine.

Two desserts are the norm. My druthers were for the blueberry, buffalo yogurt, milk and basil - where the disparate flavours remained distinct. Robinson grates real charcoal for his signature banana, chocolate, yuzu and charcoal combination, which more than matched the robustness of the Spanish sherry. Don't bite into the raspberry licorice chocolate, warned the waitress, just let it explode in the mouth. Yes, we also received a tiny eccles cake and chocolate passionfruit but it was a great metaphor for Nel's as a whole. You come here to be surprised, delighted and stimulated and Nelly Robinson steps up to the plate each and every time. Easily one of the stars of the Sydney restaurant firmament at half the usual cost. Nel Restaurant, 75 Wentworth Ave, City; phone (02) 9212 2206.

In gentrified Petersham, a block of luxury flats is a dead-cert development when a site of any size comes up for sale. More so, when the premises have been a former movie theatre and then a skating rink. But the downstairs space of the old Majestic theatre stayed empty for a long time until **Warren Landsman** and **Tim Reen** opened **Mercado Europa** - a hipster



foodie mix of delicatessen, fromagerie, bakery, florist, cafe and more. Within a short walk of the mansions of Petersham North and the long-established eating strip of Audley St, locals have flocked to this upscale addition to their 'hood.

The mood is very Manhattan industrial and after building up a brisk trade in breakfasts and lunches, Landsman and Reen opened the **Majestic Harvest Restaurant** for dinner as they waited for a liquor licence for the intimate upstairs wine bar. "Now Showing," said the old heritage movie display board as we swung through the doors. Chef **Steve Wellstead** (ex-The London Hotel in Balmain) certainly deserves top billing. Not least for his trademark dish of braised lamb gnocchi - bursting with meaty flavour and peppery seasoning, it's at once filling and light.

The tightly edited menu has a Mediterranean overlay and prices are reasonable so regulars can drop by often. We started with a pork and pistachio terrine - unctuous and flavourful - and crisp pork ear. The whole shoulder of lamb had gone but I was more than satisfied with the spatchcock served with chickpea, tomatoes and spicy Med-style seasoning. The Scotch fillet steak was properly succulent. Wellstead's benchmark excellence was also very much in evidence in the chocolate marmalade mousse. A first rate addition to the Inner West dining scene and worth the drive from the Lower North Shore and Esatern suburbs. Majestic Harvest restaurant, 49 New Canterbury Rd, Petersham; phone (02) 8097 2222.

A heritage order also preserves the character of the **Old Clare Hotel** after a multi-million dollar reno but mixes things up with **Silvereye**, one of the hottest new restaurants in the city. Brit chef **Sam Miller**, who worked in Copenhagen's Noma, one of the world's top three restaurants, for five years is the star attraction. As at Nel, menu degustations are the thing - short (11-course; \$140 without wine) or long (17 courses; \$175 without wine). The dishes change almost daily and produce sighs of delight as diners are served the ultimate in Nordic-cum-Aussie cuisine. A modern approach to pickling, salting and curing is blended with flowers, herbs and vegetables for deceptively simple gems such as Tommy's turnip tempura, juniper smoked lamb, blue eye cod with mushroom broth, beetroot and blackcurrant and shrimp in a box. Simply brilliant. Silvereye, The Old Clare Hotel, 20 Broadway, Chippendale; phone (02) 8277 8520. **I**

Above: Nelly Robinson, Head Chef and dish from Nel Restaurant.