

brisbane grapevine

LIZZIE LOEL



THE Fortitude Valley complex known as Mac and Ann (so-named because it's an arcade that runs between Ann and McLachlan streets) is literally packed with restaurants.

There are glamorous fit outs and specialised themes - Spanish bar food at **Gordita**, French Creole offerings at **Papa Jack's**, rustic Italian at Locanda and hearty, Southern fried American fare at **Mighty Mighty** and the **Buffalo Bar**. Unfortunately not all of them made it to the end of the year - Locanda, with its elegant decor and simple but delicious food - closed after a few months but the space has been snapped up by the Mighty Mighty crew for its third venue, **Sin Vida**. Colourful and exotic, the place is styled around the Day of the Dead and the accompanying three-day food and people-based fiesta. The glossary is riddled with Mexican and Aztec staples - amaranth, Migas, Mole, pico de gallo, plaintain, poblano peppers and tamale.

Entradas, tacos and primeros headline the menu and there's plenty of deliciousness to choose from. Beef bone broth with black chilli and bitter melon is served in a mug, and is a nice accompaniment for pork crackling with achiote and lime, or maybe a bowl guacamole filled with white onion, coriander, tomato and jalapeno served with house-made corn chips.

Next up ceviches and quesadilla de chorizo, Mexican fried chicken and a range of soft corn tacos with diverse fillings like pork belly and queso fresco with tomatillo salsa, crumbed prawns, apple slaw and jalapeno relish or pumpkin, raisins and jalapeno crema.

Principales or main courses include chilli-braised goat with green rice, black onyx skirt steak with fried potatoes, frijoles and roasted green tomatoes and, the piece de resistance, a seafood opera of mussels, vongole, market fish, prawns, pinto beans in a heady broth of tomatoes, bell peppers and saffron.

Crema catalane is lemon-scented and makes for a sweet finish, but so does the caramel quesadilla with sweet corn gelato and cinnamon crema or you can keep it light and fresh with a lime and avocado sorbet with coconut jelly and coconut migas. 12/100 McLachlan St Fortitude Valley; phone (07) 0403 654 209.

St Baxter is up the road in Brunswick St on the site of the former Cafe Del 'Ugo, a legendary Italian run by the Robertiello family for a couple of decades. St Baxter is a Californian eatery with a bright, beachy feel and a menu mix of street food, taqueria-style dishes and meats and ribs cooked on the barbaqoa.

Charred corn is drizzled with lime and parmesan with hints of chipotle, kingfish ceviche is cured in blood orange with avocado, jalapeno and coriander. Fish tacos with cactus salsa is popular and so is the soft shell crab taco with kimchi mayo and pickled cucumber. Roasted suckling pork is coated in a tangy tamarind caramel served in lettuce cups with an orange salad. Beef cheek mole on a celeriac puree is a rich choice as is 12-hour lamb shoulder with chilli relish and a pea, mint and freekah salad. 693 Brunswick St New Farm; phone (07) 3254 0277.

Across the river at West End there's been a mini explosion of **Izakaya's**. Described as alehouses with food, **Izakaya Goku** opened in the heart of Boundary St earlier this year to an appreciative audience.

Painted black within the two rooms - one a bar, the other a simple but cosy dining room - seating is at high tables with comfortable stools, the menu is wide ranging and there's plenty of tippie, both Japanese and Aussie.

Begin with a large range of sushi and sashimi spicy Mooloolaba tuna rolls, salmon California rolls and teriyaki-seared kingfish with avocado and cucumber. Move on to delicious, creamy-centred octopus balls topped with fine flakes of bonito and some mayo. 68 Boundary St, West End; phone (07) 3844 9607.

Around the corner is **Izakana-Yo-Okuman**, a blond wood bedecked interior with a pleasant bar at which you can sit and watch the action in the glassed-in kitchen.

Giant handmade ceramic bowls hold a garlicky broth and soft, house-made ramen noodles. Agadashi tofu is also abundant; blocks of silken tofu are coated in a fine layer of fried rice flour then dropped into a dashi broth. It's delicious and so is karaage chicken, cinnamon redolent, lightly spiced pieces of chicken fried to golden, crunchy and moreish. Bento boxes and ramen noodles dominate the pared back lunch menu and you can have a karaage chicken, teriyaki or chicken schnitzel box, or ginger fired pork, sashimi, tempura or sushi bento. 6/220 Melbourne St, South Brisbane; phone (07) 3844 0789.

Above: SinVida exterior and taco dish.