

A HOTEL licensed for up to 850 people opened in the middle of the year in the middle of Melbourne. The **Garden State Hotel** in Flinders Lane - where the once iconic Rosati restaurant previously sat - opened to much curiosity (over 14000 people went for a look, drink or meal in the first 16 days of operation) and for a city that doesn't always embrace larger dining rooms, Melbourne has picked up the Garden State with both hands and is asking for more. Perhaps it's because the hotel has been broken into different sections - creating individual areas - to accommodate different needs so you don't feel like you're sitting in a mess hall. In the main dining room, the **Garden Grill Room**, reminiscent of a New York Grill you'll find great steaks, a Raw Bar and a hefty selection of seafood dishes. On the basement level lies a saloon called the **Rose Garden** where you can sip on cocktails and sample bar snacks. The first floor you will find the **Balcony Dining Room**, a private dining room for up to 20 people; there's also the **Public Bar and The Kiosk** with toasted sandwiches and other foods-to-go. **The Observatory** is a sophisticated, light-filled space for up to 120 people with views to the beer garden below and out into the city. The menus, by **Ashly Hicks**, formerly head chef of Circa in St Kilda, have been created to be flexible and are built around good produce. He has taken on a beast of a business - serving salted snapper beignets and Sher Wagyu hotdogs in the Rose Garden to lamb ribs and market fish in the Public Bar as well as all the other outlets. The site of the venue that began 130 years ago as a textile mill, made its mark as Rosati but is now one of the more significant developments in the city, bringing the spotlight back to that part of Flinders Lane. 101 Flinders Lane, Melbourne; phone (03) 8396 5777.

You'd think we'd have enough good Italian dining rooms in Melbourne; there's Grossi Fiorentino, Ombra and Tipo 00 in the CBD and Richmond's Union Dining and Osteria la Passione. These are just a handful of venues in a city that loves Italian food and it's this love that has seen the opening of **Massi** on Little Collins St celebrated by the corporate city crowd. Chef **Joseph Vargetto** - who owns Mr

Bianco, another Italian favourite in Kew - is behind Massi. Named after Vargetto's son Massimo, it's a stylish 50-seater dining room, including stools around the bar and 30 at a combination of booths and tables. Take in an Aperol Spritz or Campari at the marble bar matched with some salumi from the bright red meat slicer (also on the bar) or sip on a cafe corretto with cannoli. You can also nestle in to a booth and take in the classic Italian dishes that have Vargetto's undeniably contemporary approach. Still-warm focaccia is served in a gold-edged calico bag, Spanish pork sausage stained with squid ink is a chewy salty addition to the antipasti and pickled vegetables zest up the meats. Vargetto's squid ink spaghetti already has the regulars demanding it never be removed from the menu. The tangle of pasta given crunch with toasty pangrattato is ample, with juicy crab and clams, vibrant in a buttery seafood reduction. If seafood isn't your thing, try the Cavatelli with slow-cooked pork shoulder ragu and white beans - an earthy sweet dish lifted by the vegetable protein but ever so comforting (even in the warmer weather) or the roast chicken stuffed with cotechino and soft polenta is the stuff of the Mother Country but taken to the New World, pork sausage filling the bird with the creamy polenta that binds the flavours. It's very good.

The wine list is also clever with the mostly Italian selection and the appearance of small boutique Australian makers. 445 Little Collins St, Melbourne; phone (03) 9670 5347.

Quite literally just around the corner from Massi is **Syracuse** on Bank Place. It's a former bank building replete with archways, wooden trimmings and enormous ceilings that has also been catering to the corporates in this part of town for the last 20 years. The owners, **Richard** and **Nancy Moussi**, bought the venue in 2011 and just this year employed **Philippa Sibley** - the highly regarded pastry chef and savoury chef - to run their tiny kitchen. They've given Sibley an open brief and it's created a new canvas for the much-loved dining room that has ebbed and flowed in recent years. Sibley is French trained, with a modern sensibility that has made it more difficult to get a table

in the 70-seater. The cooler months saw a mushroom and chestnut risotto with chevre fly out the door and the more comforting Western Plains pork cotoletta, fennel and apple slaw keeps business folk, families and hungry types sated. It's Sibley on the pans, so be sure to plan for dessert, perhaps the rhubarb and beurre noisette tart, rose and strawberry. Syracuse has long been known as a great wine bar with food to support the list and changing wines-by-the-glass, but thanks to Sibley the food is now on equal billing. 23 Bank Place, Melbourne; phone (03) 9670 1777.



All above: Massi restaurant interior views.