

IT can be seen as a pro or a con. Living in a food-centric city like Melbourne means a perpetual feast of choice in terms of where to eat out, but it can also see many restaurants come and go in the time it takes to make a latte. In the last few months we've seen some very experienced staff finally open their own venues and have welcomed the return of one of our iconic eateries. And with these venues we can't see any of these places going anywhere for a long time - they're all great but they do add to the quandary of choice.

Hospitality veterans **Steven Nelson, Joe Durrant** and **Mark Protheroe** have all done decent time in some of Melbourne's best restaurants. Protheroe, an award-winning sommelier was head "somm" and wine buyer for the Grossi group in the CBD, Durrant a front-of-house gun was Protheroe's colleague as the manager of Grossi Florentino upstairs restaurant and Nelson, the former head chef of Bistro Gitan in South Yarra, a venue owned by Jacques Reymond and his family. The trio has gone out on its own, taking on an old 1870 pub in the inner-northern suburb of Fitzroy North and turning it into **The Recreation Bar & Bistro**. Its most recent incarnation was a cafe called Charlie's and prior to that was Marmalade and Soul owned by chef Raymond Capaldi. Protheroe's wine experience, his contacts and knowledge means he's selling and pouring some gems

from around the world designed to work with Nelson's French-influenced dishes. Yes, there's a rib-eye steak on the menu - cooked on their custom-made charcoal grill - to keep the beef lovers happy, but there's a clever mix of light and veg focused dishes for a quick snack with a glass of wine or what would make the beginnings of dinner. Think Spanish mackerel ceviche with cucumber, green chilli and eau de vie or garlic king prawns doused in tomato dressing with mango and avocado salsa. 162-170 Queens Parade, Fitzroy North; phone (03) 9042 2707.

It was in January 2014 that Melbourne woke to the news that its much-loved St Kilda bay-side restaurant, **Stokehouse**, had been razed by fire. It's taken this long to rebuild and reopen, but **Frank and Sharon van Haandel** - who employed the skill of architect, Robert Simeoni - have realised the goal of creating something new while still acknowledging and embracing the culture of old. The completely new, box-like structure overlooks that perennial expanse of bay, always a Melbourne landmark view and the buzz of the regulars, the relaxed, informed service and the St Kilda culture are all very much a Stokehouse imprint. The menu created by executive chef **Richard Ousby** and head chef **Ollie Hansford** remains very breezy and fresh with a seafood-focus. The dish that's garnered signature status already is slightly seared

(or in this case blowtorched) pieces of tuna next to a gently spicy wasabi syllabub and radish, a classic flavour combination. Western Australian arrowhead squid is roasted and simply dressed in a lemon vinaigrette finished with a sharp pickled green mango with dollops of a vibrant salsa verde. The building is also home to **Pontoon** - what used to be Stokehouse Downstairs - which is right on the water. This is filled with gorgeous people, sipping cocktails and soaking in the sunset while there's also **Paper Fish**, a takeaway fish



and chip kiosk that has already nailed the batter on the fish - crisp, salty and delicious. 30 Jacka Boulevard, St Kilda; phone (03) 9525 5555.

Gilson opened in South Yarra at the end of 2016 in a prime location on Domain Rd overlooking the Botanic Gardens. The eatery, opened from breakfast through to dinner (reminiscent of Cumulus Inc in the city, albeit at a lower price point), is owned by **Jamie and Loren McBride** who also have day-time cafes Mammoth, Touchwood and Barry. This is their first restaurant proper, moving from breakfast and lunch into a smart dinner menu that suits the upscale and discerning market in the inner-south-east. It has a classic bistro feel, with its fit-out by architects du jour, Projects of Imagination, dressed with unfinished zinc, rouge concrete and Carrara marble touches. The menu shifts from breakfasts that might include baked eggs with cavalo nero and ricotta salata to lunch of grilled cucumber and smoked cultured cream or straightforward sandwiches such as ham, provolone and Dijon mustard. Dinner gets heartier with pizzas - toppings include mixed mushrooms, mascarpone and fresh herbs or broccolini, burrata, garlic and chilli, lemon or mains of, perhaps wood-fired chicken, baby carrots and jus gras.

The wine list is a succinct collection of 50 bottles, with the wines-by-the-glass changing regularly. Gilson is open daily 6am to 11pm. 171 Domain Rd, South Yarra; phone (03) 9866 3120.

Above: Gilson restaurant in South Yarra.
Far Left: Delicious drink from Gilson restaurant.
Left: Friendly service with a smile at Gilson.

