



MELBOURNE chefs and restaurateurs continue to push their businesses, their teams and themselves, opening second (or fifth) venues and keeping the hungry Melbourne audience sated.

Chef **Ashley Davis** opened his second restaurant, **Messer**, on Gertrude St, Fitzroy. Davis, who also owns and operates Copper Pot Seddon in Melbourne's inner-west opened the doors on the 45-seater in autumn and has created a menu inspired by the diversity of produce from the market villages of Europe.

Messer (which translates to knife in German) offers lunch and dinner menus that change regularly determined by what's available at market. Lunch sees a selection of salads that may include salt-baked beetroot, chestnut, Pedro Ximenez; organic grain pilaf, smoked carrots, goats curd or zucchini with fennel, parmesan and olives.

A rotisserie cooks joints of meat - think, pork hock or spatchcock - and seasonal vegetables while an in-house smoker works its magic with meats, seafood and more vegetables. A menu del dia (menu of the day) for lunch-only, offers three courses for \$39 and an evening menu of small plates encourages guests to choose as few or as many tastes as they wish. Alternatively, guests can ask the team at Messer to choose a meal of eight different dishes for the table at \$100/person, like kingfish with squid ink and lemon; clams a la plancha; grilled artichokes with black garlic; flame-grilled duck and spelt or smoked sardines with onion pickle.

At the core of the menus is seasonality, generosity, a palpable joy from feeding people well and great value. Davis takes much from his 10 years of living in Europe and translates it easily into a Melbourne context.

This element of care extends to the dining room. Davis works closely with designer and business partner Craig Bridge and

the pair has created a room that leverages the structures of Euro markets and dining rooms in a not-so-obvious manner. Spanish knockdown plaster and tempered steel shelves meet a concrete and oxidised copper open bar and pass, all softened with hues of azure blue tiles and features. Aged leather banquettes and crisp oak timber tables create a vibrant space inviting diners to settle in for an experience.

Venue manager **Kelly Woodliffe** arrived at Messer, most recently from l'Hotel Gitan in Prahran, and the wine program is designed by sommelier **Wiremu Andrews** who says: "In European culture wine is considered an integral ingredient in the dining experience, so in keeping with the philosophy of our kitchen, provenance of our wines is crucial. We take a non-dogmatic approach to our beverage offering and include both classic and lo-fi wines." Shop 1, 166 Gertrude St, Fitzroy; phone (03) 9419 0035.

Scott Pickett's latest restaurant, **Matilda 159 Domain**, officially opened its doors beneath the hotly anticipated boutique hotel United Places Botanic Gardens, on South Yarra's Domain Rd. The launch marks Pickett's fifth venue and presents a fresh approach for the chef restaurateur, with the exploration of the oldest form of cookery - fire - augmented with a modern Australian menu. "Named after my daughter, Matilda is inspired by family and reflects my time growing up in South Australia. The menu is approachable, the produce seasonal and cooked simply, I want it to be somewhere that locals can pop in for a wine or two at the bar or settle in for lunch and stay until dinner and be comfortable," says Pickett. The menu highlights native ingredients with the incorporation of flames, warm coals or smoke in each of the dishes, in a gas-free kitchen. Cherry wood chips are used to smoke the Macedon Ranges duck and

Mornington Peninsula cabernet vine clippings are utilised for the Blackmore bavette.

Signature dishes have been established very quickly, including dressed spanner crab, prawn butter, flat bread; smoked Flinders Island lamb ribs with spiced onion miso and Glenora rhubarb, burnt custard, lemon verbena.

The wine menu is built around premier Australian labels and European classics, as well as predominately local beers and spirits. Designer, Projects of Imagination has used raw materials throughout to bring the venue to life, incorporating inspiration from the adjacent Royal Botanic Gardens to create a venue that exudes comfort and warmth to match the hospitality offering. Matilda 159 Domain Rd, South Yarra; phone (03) 9089 6668.

With 63,882 T-bone steaks, 100,254 Bombe Alaskas and over one million beautiful guests, 21 years later Gail and Kevin Donovan and their team, are celebrating a milestone birthday for their much-loved St Kilda restaurant, **Donovans**. Twenty-one years ago, Gail and Kevin took on this outstanding location and realised their dream of creating a warm and welcoming destination.

The celebrations include one-off dinners, weekly prizes, special offers, guided tours of the front- and back-of-house and the opportunity to dine with Gail and Kevin and hear 21 years' worth of hospitality stories.

Gail and Kevin refer to their restaurant as a she, "she can be difficult," laughs Gail, "but that's why we love her. Three years ago, she had a facelift (referring to the fire that closed her temporarily) and she came back better than ever!" 40 Jacka Blvd, St Kilda; phone (03) 9534 8221.

Top: Dressed spanner crab from Matilda 159 Domain restaurant, photo credit Gareth Sobey.

Below: Matilda 159 Domain restaurant, photo Tim Grey.

