

sydney grapevine

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IT'S strange that it's taken so long for someone to open a restaurant dedicated to Basque cuisine in Sydney. San Sebastian in northern Spain is one of the food capitals of Europe and boasts the continent's highest number of Michelin-rated restaurants per capita. **Ortzi** has grasped the nettle and its Basque-inspired menu straddles the line between the traditional bodegas celebrated for their pintxos, the local version of tapas, and the sublime fare that has made the restaurants of Basque super-chefs such as Juan Maria Arzak and Eneko Atxa places of pilgrimage for gourmets.

Ortzi means sky in Basque, which is unrelated to any Indo-European language, and the restaurant's fit-out is a bit of a one-off, too. Architect Jaime Au has configured a sleek space of off-white walls and concrete flooring teamed with Tasmanian oak tabletops and a bar which was hand-crafted by Ortzi's multi-talented team. Co-owners **Michael Otto** and **Edward Saxton** also operate Italian hotspot Sagra in Darlinghurst and have insisted on contemporary cosiness over two levels. The upstairs mezzanine and the ground floor are both suitable for a quick plate of pintxos for two such as Iberian ham, ajo blanco and potato, and chorizo tortilla or a multi-course feast for four.

Otto, who is also the chef, closely follows the Basque principle of using locally-sourced meat, fish and vegetables, and constantly changes the menu to match market conditions. The bread, butter, pickles and condiments are made on-site, and the wine list has an emphasis on bottlings that showcase Basque influence on both sides of the Pyrenees - northern Spain and south west France. The Basques have a strong cider-making tradition and flat cidre is as popular as wine for washing food, so Ortzi delivers in spades for those looking for a point of difference in their beverage choices.

It was a brass monkey night when we visited, so we started dinner with three instantly warming small plates - salt cod omelette with salsa rossa, scallop and chorizo

gratin and a crescent-shaped empanadita. The accompanying fresh-baked bread and black olives in extra virgin olive oil quietened hunger cravings and off-set the peppery heat. Looking over to the next table, we made a mental bookmark to return for the lobster and celeriac roll and grilled sardines with lemon.

The choice of mains is a revolving door with mainstays. On some days, the listings veer from wood-fired rib-eye with charred onions and romesco to charred pork chop with wood-roasted apples. On others, a Basque version of gnocchetti with pungent goats milk cheese or spatchcock with radicchio, paprika and yogurt is up for grabs. The real sleight-of-hand, though, is that this hearty-sounding fare doesn't weigh you down.

In short, we had room for dessert after five share plates and that was a major bonus. You never know what you're going to get when a description is simply - baked cheesecake. Will it be a too-dense wedge or a loose grouping of ingredients strewn across the plate at the whim of the chef? Ortzi's version is a light-as-air hybrid that looks conventional but slips down with creamy ease. The Basque rice pudding with Pedro Ximenez-soaked pears was a temptation, but the waiter steered us towards the chocolate mousse with the comment - It's the best. It was. Ortzi, 6 Hunt St, Surry Hills; phone (02) 9211 2414.

Mama Mulan has a simple aim - to be the best contemporary Chinese restaurant on the North Shore. A lofty goal in Chatswood where Asian eateries spring up like mushrooms, but the restaurant knows its worth. The decor stuns at first sight and is the work of designer Paul Papadopoulos of DS17, who was responsible for Alpha and Nour restaurants. Yet even though it boasts 180 seats, Mama Mulan's mixture of antiques, expensive lighting, free form Asian art and smart casual furniture plus the ability to seal off parts of the space makes for a very Hong Kong-moneyed feel that would satisfy demanding tai tais - pampered ladies who lunch.

Under the guiding hand of energetic hospitality entrepreneur **Kim Jin**, Mama Mulan was packed with Chinese and Caucasian families, Millennials and traditional North Shore professionals within a week of opening. Word had spread fast that the menu was the work of **Marble Ng**, the inventive chef behind the success of Lotus and Chef's Gallery.


Mulan means lily magnolia and there's certainly many fragrant menu options from the hand-pulled noodles through live



seafood, dumplings, tofu specialties and much more. In keeping with the sophisticated food, cocktails such as Mulan Rouge with Grey Goose Vodka and Imperial Garden, based on Bombay gin, rosemary and grapefruit, were being downed by trendy young things. The wine list has been carefully selected to match the Shandong-inspired menu, from aromatic Pewsey Vale riesling to Tappo sauvignon from Marlborough and Didier Montchovet pinot noir from Burgundy.

We wandered from the dumplings to the entrees for truly fang-fresh prawn pot stickers, mushroom spring rolls and Peking Duck pancakes. Live lobster and snow crab were on hand at market price for those keen to make a splash. Our eyes fell on the hot and spicy kung pao chicken and the just-caught delicacy of the steamed coral trout fillet with lemongrass and ginger. As a longtime fan of Lotus, I would come back for the wok-fried wagyu beef with asparagus and black pepper sauce, and braised pork belly with cinnamon, star anise and bamboo shoots.

I usually avoid desserts in Chinese restaurants. Too many memories of dull banana fritters and poorly made rice puddings. Mama Mulan's breaks the mould with Chinese creme brulee, made with condensed milk, that rates the description - taste sensation. The restaurant has also teamed with popular cult favourite Duo Duo ice cream to create its own more-ish fried ice cream selection. Mama Mulan, Level 1, the Concourse, Chatswood; phone (02) 9157 1488.

Woollahra's long-established locale **The Wine Library** is flourishing under new owners - chef **Matt Taylor** (ex-Bentley), sommelier **Tim Perlstone** (ex-Merivale) and **Sam Jones** (ex-Tequila Mockingbird and Monopole). New dishes include pork rillettes, chicken liver parfait and beef tartare. A great wine list with more than 350 hand-picked selections and the fact that the venue takes reservations for the first time seals the deal. The Wine Library, 18 Oxford St, Woollahra; phone (02) 9368 7484. 

Top right: Delicious food from Mama Mulan restaurant. *Left:* Basque-inspired food from Ortzi restaurant.

