



## melbournegrapevine

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DESPITE the calls of an over-saturated hospitality market and the almost impossible task of finding good staff, Melbourne chefs and restaurant owners are branching out, being brave (or crazy) and opening first-time solo venture or second venues.

**Capitano** is a new addition to Carlton, a suburb already packed with Italian restaurants of various descriptions and price points. Described by chef and co-owner Casey Wall as, "an Australian take on an American-Italian restaurant". Wall and his business partners', Sommelier - **Banjo Harris Plane**; Front-of-house - **Manu Potoi** and Manager - **Michael Bascetta** (who also co-own **Bar Liberty** in Fitzroy) have found an expected gap in the market, serving a menu of full-flavoured, unfussy Italian-esque food. Think shaved prosciutto (made in Ballarat) and pork neck gabagool (cured ham) with house-made sourdough and spicy pickled fennel. The cheese pizza with pecorino, fresh and aged mozzarella is heavy on the salt but full of comfort. There's a choice of toppings - rainbow chard, new season onions, pickled chilli, fennel salami, anchovy and mortadella - which add to the intensity of flavour (we love the combination of pickled chilli and fennel salami). The sourdough base has a good char and chew. This is, quite simply, very good pizza.

A dish of Vesuvio pasta arrives as oversized fusilli doused in a sauce of onion, tinned tomatoes, cream and garlic. And the clam pasta is a lush mix of spaghetti in a sauce of butter, lemon and parsley. The veal parmigiana easily feeds up to three people, oozy with fresh mozzarella and basil, it blankets the plate on which it's served.

Salads are simple but the perfect match to the uncomplicated mains. Wild greens are coated in an anchovy dressing, with loads of parmesan. Another salad of sliced apple, fresh fennel and aged ricotta is also a zesty foil.

The wine list has an Italian focus - no American drops here, with all chosen for either their weight, acidity, or fruit-forward characters to enable them to stand up to the big flavours. 421 Rathdowne St, Carlton; phone (03) 9134 8555.

**Embla Wine Bar** on Russell Street in the city has a new sibling, **Lesa**. It's taken longer to open than anyone, particularly than the owners **Christian McCabe** and **Dave Verheul** anticipated, but the doors swung open on the dining room directly upstairs from Embla in August.

Lesa means "to gather" in Old Norse, and the team have gathered all the elements a good restaurant needs to thrive - a beautiful room, a gun team on the floor, a schmick wine list and smart cooking from the kitchen.

Lesa is a restaurant that offers a set menu, and chef Dave Verheul, takes an intelligent approach to local produce, bringing out its best through playful textures, subtle work with flavours and clever cooking. Think raw flounder with hazelnut, green almond and pear leaf, a chicken porridge dish with almond milk and black chestnut (that you wish would never end) or an aged pork loin with buckwheat miso, kale and pickled walnut.

These guys are known for their wine selections - thanks to Embla downstairs - so expect more interesting, low-intervention wines upstairs that the savvy staff will happily guide you through.

The room is immediately welcoming. Moody lighting, textured brick, leather cushioned banquettes and loads of wood allow you to immerse yourself into the nest Lesa is above the bustle of the streets below. At the moment they're open four nights a week, with a view to open more down the track. Level 1, 122 Russell Street; phone (03) 9654 5923.

We couldn't help but wonder if chef **Julian Hills** was brave or crazy when he opened his first solo-venture in the first half of 2018. For six years Hills had been head

chef at the award-winning **Paringa Estate** restaurant on the Mornington Peninsula but he decided to challenge himself, open his own venue and take charge at **Navi**. Set in Seddon, in Melbourne's inner-west and a suburb rarely associated with high-end dining, Navi has Hills firmly in the driver's seat, with a contemporary, edgy menu that changes almost daily, working with produce that may only be at its peak for a short time. There are only 25 seats and he's open only four dinners a week.

Hills has a Bachelor of Fine Arts in drawing and ceramics and this comes through in all the details of the room - detail is everywhere - including his hand-made plates upon which every dish is served.

A dish of smoked blue mackerel marinated in honey and white soy, and then aged for a week in beeswax has got the city talking and other dishes may include: butter-poached marron, with chargrilled leek and egg yolk caramel or suckling pig with miso tapenade.

The drinks list - by Turin-born sommelier **Cristina Flora**, formerly senior sommelier at **the Press Club** - takes unexpected turns with a sake selection and wines broken down to Australian and International sections. Bookings are essential - Navi is already booked up until early 2019. 83B Gamon Street, Yarraville; phone (03) 9939 9774. 🍷



**Top left:** Smoked honey bonito, sea greens, honey and roasted smoked bone dashi from Navi restaurant (photo credit. Ed Sloane).

**Top right:** Pine mushrooms from Navi restaurant (photo credit. Ed Sloane).

**Above:** Duck in two parts from Navi restaurant (photo credit. Ed Sloane).