

WHEN a restaurant is packed with locals, not the foodie equivalent of tyre-kickers, within a week of opening it's a sure sign of longevity. **Chubby Cheeks** is named after the toddler daughter of owners **Songpol** and **Lyn Manoonpong** and the tongue-in-cheek attitude extends to the funky yet stylish fit out. The design team at Guru Projects has fashioned a welcoming space that fits Paddington's upscale image - exposed brick walls, timber trusses and front-of-house lounges tailor-made for a girls' night out or romantic date.

The Manoonpongs also own Armchair Collective, a homewares store specialising in one-off restored armchairs and chic adjacent cafe in Mona Vale. South of the Harbour Bridge, they have hired executive chef **David Glaesson** (formerly of Luke Mangan's Glass) and head chef **Em Meechia** (ex-Luke Nguyen's award-winning Red Lantern). The gist of the sophisticated menu is Thai but other Asian cuisines are well-represented in the edited but wide-ranging listings divided into seven headings to encourage sharing - Cheeky Bites, Cheekier Bites, Chubby Bites, Chubby's Noodles/Rice, Cheeky Sides and Cheeky Sweets.

Cocktails, wines and spirits are a major focus because of Paddo's professional demo, starting with inspiring mixes such as Kaffir Lime Daiquiri and Thai Spiced Negroni. Asian beers such as Singha make up 50 per cent of the amber ales. The wine list has serious chops with European, Australian and New Zealand bottlings, ranging from Olivier Merlin Bourgogne Black through Wanaka Road Pinot Gris and Mada Shiraz from Canberra.

We cherry-picked our way through the hard-to-decide menu, beginning with edamame salsa, tiger prawn and sweet potato fritters and tea-smoked duck breast and banana blossom salad. The last choice is hard to describe because the disparate flavours - while remaining separate - coalesced into a whole that was so much greater than its parts.

A vegetable curry is to Asian cuisines what an omelette is to Western chefs. There's nowhere to run or hide and results can be disappointing without due care. The aromatic yellow curry of cauliflowers was a vegetarian triumph and the central ingredient was enhanced by charred kipfler potatoes, eggplants, pumpkin, green beans and tofu. Earlier diners had enthusiastically chosen the steamed barramundi with lotus leaf, so



it was off limits to us. No bad thing when the stand-ins were 12-hour slow-cooked Rangers Valley wagyu brisket with green papaya and burnt chilli, and crispy skin free range chook with Chubby Cheeks' special satay sauce.

There were only two desserts - black sticky rice, pandan custard and coconut ice cream, and deep-fried salted caramel ice cream with popcorn and salted caramel sauce. We opted for the former and went the whole hog with a 2017 Juniper Estate Cane Cut Riesling from Margaret River to sweeten an already moreish deal. The staff could have doubled as extras from the movie *Crazy Rich Asians* and were as efficient as they were friendly and casually stylish. The clincher? You can buy most of Chubby Cheeks' props if they catch your fancy. Chubby Cheeks, 437 Oxford St, Paddington; phone (02) 9332 1886.

There's been an outbreak of hideaway-style restaurants opening their doors over the past few months. Steam Mill Lane bills itself as Sydney's largest little laneway and is the location of **Bang Bang**, an 85-seat izakaya bar which would look at home in Tokyo's trend-central district of Shinjuku. Sydney graphic artist Harley Johnson has supplied Japanese-inspired illustrations, but the vintage street signs, lanterns, vending machines and lacquered tables were all imported from Japan.

Hard by the massive International Convention Centre between Darling Harbour and Haymarket, attention to detail is Bang Bang's trump card. There's a soundproof karaoke glass box if you take full advantage of the curated selection of Japanese whiskies which features pricey bottlings such as Yamazaki 12 Year Old Single Malt or the restaurant's own craft beer, Bang Bang Lager. There's also an enticing line-up of sake and shochu, a private tatami room and yatai stall offering steaming bowls of ramen.

Head chef **Kokubo Yuji** has been attracting herds of office workers for his lunch menus, featuring udon, curries, donburi, omelettes and the Bang Bang Tepasaki, a "tower" of double-fried chicken wings slathered in a fiery soy glaze. The evening cocktail list takes its cue from Japan's back alley rojiura culture, specialising in shochu and sake creations such as Citrus Bombard, citrus fruits squeezed in their skins and infused with shochu.



We want Bang Bang to deliver a taste of Tokyo's past and present to Sydney, says head of operations **Ayako Sugimura**. As you tuck into dinner listings such as robata, sushi, sashimi, tempura and the amazing fusion dish - carbonara udon - it's hard to disagree. Bang Bang, 14 Steam Mill Lane, Darling Square near Haymarket; phone (02) 8591 7818.

If I read the over-used word "storytelling" one more time I am going to scream. Most of the so-called "stories" involved aren't worth telling or would be news only to a 10-year-old. But I have to admit that **Bistecca** has transformed a concept that's become a cliché into something attention-grabbing. For starters, it may take you a while to identify the entrance to the restaurant even when you have walked past it a couple of times and there's only one dish on the menu - Bistecca alla Fiorentina - Tuscany's famous homage to the T-bone steak.

Even if the meat in question wasn't Riverina grain-fed black angus, many people would come here because the owners have banned mobile phones. Or rather, you have to leave them at the door. You can't book and have to front up and hope for one of the two sittings - 6pm or 8pm. Once you've "passed" these tests, you are ushered into a dining room that looks like its gone through distressed ageing to resemble a traditional Florentine dining room - black and white floor tiles and exposed brick.

There's plenty of vino on offer - 300 bottlings - as you decide on the size of your steak which is hand-sawn to order and charged according to weight. Grilled to perfection and seasoned with olive oil and sea salt, you choose from 12 side dishes, including Tuscan white beans. A total treat that's carried out with plenty of brio. Bistecca, 3 Dalley St, Sydney; phone (02) 8067 0450.



All photos: Food from Chubby Cheeks restaurant.