
Coombs on cuisine

Handy

In the late 1970s, I was to lunch with a (then) party of the third part, and discreetly chose the dining room of the Cricketers' Arms Hotel in Surry Hills. There I discovered one Paul Merroney was cooking up a storm. I wrote a review for *Bar News* in which I said, unwisely, 'Eschew the ground floor bar which is inhabited by sturdy females in overalls, drinking schooners of black, and engaging in vigorous arm wrestles. Go directly to the first floor where a tyro called Paul Merroney is wielding the pans.'

This provoked a *Sydney Morning Herald* hack to say that I must be *so effete*. An old friend, Ivan Judd, leapt to my defence – ('No effete he, a man of the people etc') – the controversy raged for circa 24 hours and doesn't matter anyway, but I claim to have discovered Merroney!

History traces him thru a small gig of his own somewhere in the near east and then to Merroney's at Circular Quay, with our own Bruce Solomon as silent partner. Initially very successful the venture ultimately failed, I think, because the shiny floors & full length glass walls made it just too noisy. (Tax law changes & RBT may have also had an impact, but the food was always special.)

The great news is that Paul is back! *And how!* He is proprietor chef at *Bistro 163* a few yards down from Elizabeth in King St. All his super specials are there to be had. I will mention only my personal favourites: deep-fried Blue Eye cod with chips & tartare; the beer batter is wafer thin, smooth and fine as a sheet and so crisp; leg of lamb, 'Irish stew style', brilliantly traditional, with fresh peas and potato, but with gorgeous baby lamb rather than the noisettes of County Clare in the rich lamb stock.

Not quite so handy

A sibling lunch with sister Janet (the Mother Hen of so many of the talented women who adorn our Bar), brother Jim, now a roving stipendiary magistrate, brother Jerry who puts people to sleep professionally and a stray niece, took us to *Ecco* at the Drummoyne Sailing Club. A stunning location, view wise, even for Sydney, this is a family operation in a very Italian style.

What was most impressive was the choice of the freshest ingredients, local in season produce. Figs lightly grilled, wrapped in prosciutto and topped with Gorgonzola were delicious. Ditto zucchini flowers stuffed with pecorino and deep-fried.

For mains, the stand-outs were skewered seafood grilled with garlic butter prawns, scallops, Atlantic salmon bits and a yabbie, and also a stunning, glutinous, melt in your mouth osso bucco.

A shared creme brulee stopped us dead.

The wine list is well chosen and won't bankrupt you. We drank Villa Maria sauvignon blanc from New Zealand and a Rosemount cabernet sauvignon.

Don't go on Sunday unless you like a lot of noise! I went back on a Tuesday and found it suited me better.



Home fare

During the rugby season, I am partial to a meat pie. Last week, knowing we had steamed chicken and some mushrooms I suggested chicken and mushroom pies. The party of the second part said, 'Leave it to me.' At half time in the Waratahs match she presents me with a large mushroom stuffed with chicken and onion in white sauce, topped with a circle of puff pastry. Not your Four'N Twenty, but healthier and very yummy.

Bistro 163

163 King Street, Sydney

Ph: (02) 9231 0013

Breakfast, lunch: Monday – Friday

7am to 4pm

Ecco, @ Drummoyne Sailing Club

2 St Georges Crescent, Drummoyne

Ph: (02) 9719 9394

Lunch: Tuesday – Friday & Sunday

Dinner: Tuesday – Saturday

John Coombs QC