

Julie Biuso Tastes Melbourne

Four days was all I could spare to visit the Melbourne Food & Wine Festival this year – it's all you need if you plan it well and strike it lucky. The weekend was pretty full with things I wanted to attend at the Festival, but I made use of every break in between and ate out a staggering nine times. I had like-minded company – Claire Aldous and Nici Wickes – but at times I dined alone relishing the opportunity to please no one but myself.

First stop, The Press Club where George Calombaris was on the pass serving up dishes inspired by one of the festival stars, Massimo Bottura from Florentine restaurant Osteria Francescana, holder of three Michelin stars, and others that gave a nod to his own Greek heritage. A meal of dollops and 'dust' and striking flavours, but perhaps an overload: squares of tuna as bright as summer watermelon skewered and stuck in a ball of florists' moss; a rolled loin of quail in a puddle of avgolemono; an upturned emptied can of vine leaves lifted off a plate to reveal a piece of tuna rolled in a lawn-clipping-lookalike coating of deconstructed vine leaves (very minerally), and on the side a small pile of transparent noodles and a blob of glossy yoghurt; a slice or two of wagyu, bone marrow over the top, red wine jus around, horta greens on the side, Jerusalem artichoke curls here and there, and a fricassée of mushrooms with pine mushroom purée; but perhaps the pièce de resistance, a pork roast like no other – described on the menu as pig's nipples. This melange consisted of dehydrated carrot of intense sweetness, Asian-style dried crackling that shattered to a puff of crystalline flakes on touch, a smattering of black pudding crumbs, a sprinkle of caramelised milk powder crumbs with an infant radish crowning the dish, all afloat on the richest, silkiest imaginable pommes purée, and wait for it, hidden in there, a crumbed deep-fried piglet nipple. Quelle horreur NOT! Simply a titillatingly described piece of pork belly. Other dishes had dollops of mango purée and wasabi purée, mini mounds of pickled daikon, dustings of powdered seaweed, blobs of white anchovy mayo, sparkly jelly cubes and chewy lozenges of pancetta. A salad of shredded pea shoots and golden crumbed sweetbreads, which almost seemed too ordinary amongst this sea of surprise, shock and salivation, was also in among it all.

I was back to my hotel the very second after I'd laid down the last fork and spoon of this mind-boggling feast – a feast which I have to say my Aussie dining companions simply took in their stride as another night out – in need of a serious lie down. www.thepressclub.com.au



If I had doubted my ability to cope with the onslaught of flavours, textures and concepts the night before, come morning I was up for it all over again. Breakfast was at the pop-up Greenhouse Café, erected for 20 days only over the festival period. The food could not have contrasted more sharply with the previous night's dollops and dust – it simply shone with sparkling fresh identifiable ingredients and sang with clean flavours. Herbs, 'weeds' and salad greens are grown on the rooftop of these quickly erected and dismantled pop-up foodie palaces, the outer walls of this one home to hundreds of terracotta pots with flowering strawberry plants. Other produce is organically or biodynamically grown. Grinding your own oats at the table to add to a bowl of stone fruit and yoghurt connects you to your food. If a Joost Greenhouse pops up anywhere near you sometime soon, get yourself there. www.byjoost.com

Those of you with small stomachs should skip breakfast if Mamasita is on your radar and focus on an early lunch instead. Before midday, the queues swell out of the stairwell of the first-floor establishment and start snaking along the street. Put in an order for warm tortilla chips with guacamole and salsa and a platter of char-grilled corn with queso, chipotle mayo and lime wedges the minute you are seated, then with nibbles sorted, you can contemplate the tantalising menu at a more leisurely pace. Both the slow-braised pork shoulder on mini fried tortillas with pickled jalapeno and its little cap of crackling, and crab, avocado, tamarind mayo and habanero proved to be crunchy,



creamy, fresh, hot little mouthfuls. Soft shell tacos filled with marinated prawns, red chilli and chipotle with an almond salsa not unlike a fresh peanut sauce were stunningly good. A salad with cactus leaves, something I've always wanted to try fresh, tasted like canned stewed green peppers, but a lemon chilli sorbet with mango and piquin sugar lifted our spirits again – one to share is not enough. www.mamasita.com.au

Movida is a Melbourne institution and a table is often hard to get here but we decided against booking and just stumped up willing to try our luck. We were ushered into the bar next door, where we relaxed with a drink until Movida staff came and fetched us when a table was free. With all thought of eating lightly cast to the wind, we ordered one of everything, or just about: hand-filleted Cantabrian anchovy on crouton with smoked tomato sorbet; squid ink croqueta with cuttlefish; prawn and romesco pincho (a rather too firm prawn paste lifted by an oily spicy romesco); Pyrenées wet roasted lamb breast with Fino and paprika sauce (a stand-out); manchego and membrillo (a classic); pressed quail with morcilla, apple and pickled garlic (exceptional); slow-cooked oily baby leeks which you sort of suck down whole, trying desperately not to choke; rich and fatty cubes of pork jowl with crusty crumb coating, an elegant long slice of membrillo, chickpea shoots and fennel pollen; and finally, a suitably wobbly crema Catalana and exceptional, truly exceptional churros with a fine crust on the piped tips of the biscuit edges, as if sprinkled with fairy dust, contrasting with the soft centres. These were so good, so perfect, I wanted to weep. www.movida.com.au



Lunch at Coda Bar & Restaurant offered up morsels of spanner crab, galangal, roasted chilli and lime on betel leaf; \$6.80 for two pieces. Could have eaten six. Bowls lined with lettuce leaves full of sliced beef, nahm jim, chilli, tomato and spearmint, and another of eggplant and tofu with enoki mushrooms, black vinegar and crispy garlic cleared the sinuses. Blackened quail, daikon and shiso salad, lamb chop with chimichurri, orange and cumin salt, and the Coda signature salad of shredded wombok, carrot, hot mint and red cabbage all made fresh, crunchy, tasty eating. But it was the Fremantle octopus, green mango and kaffir lime salad with roasted chilli and shallot dressing which had us swooning. There's a pleasant unpretentious air about this place coupled with a quirky mix of mainly Asian food with some Italianate dishes that make a visit to it well worthwhile. www.codarestaurant.com.au

The good thing about an early lunch is that it can be followed by an early dinner. Out to St Kilda we went to Golden Fields. At 5.30pm the restaurant was empty, the staff still being briefed on the evening's specials but within 30 minutes the place was full to bursting. I'd stop by any evening for a bag of their soft sweet bread rolls with buttery glazed tops housing thick tender chunks of poached crayfish and swirls of kewpie (mayo). Rolled pork belly, white kimchi and yuxiang sauce with its lightly fermented deep spice took the flavours up a notch. Sticky steamy pork dumplings with Shanghai chilli vinegar were, well, sticky and steamy, with a hot bite in the tail. The stand-out dish here was an heirloom tomato salad with a tamarind dressing and crispy shallots. Oh, but I forgot the duck. A triumph of twice-cooked duck leg, which flaked to tender shreds under its deep-golden crust – mouth-wateringly good. A whole John Dory minus the head with mustard, ginger and shredded undercooked potato underwhelmed. But we ended on a high note with two puddings: the much-maligned sago served here with segments of mangosteen floating in a lime and ginger syrup, and a peanut butter parfait with salted caramel and soft chocolate. www.goldenfields.com.au



Cumulus Inc, where you can either perch at the bar for a fast eat or take your time at a table, is a popular lunchtime spot. The kitchen charcuterie selection of tissue-thin slices of wagyu bresaola and other cured meats gets the taste buds primed. Grilled octopus with smoked paprika and basil with blobs of basil mayo, sherry vinegar and black olives was tender and the flavours complex and multi-layered. Fried softshell crab with kimchi was gorgeously crunchy, but the stand-out was a vegetable dish: fried cauliflower spiced with cumin with goats' curd, rocket, pine nuts and pomegranate seeds finished with a generous drizzle of pomegranate syrup. The roasted zucchini, smoked curd, honey and chardonnay vinegar, which sounded promising, was too bitter for my taste. www.cumulusinc.com.au



On my last night in Melbourne, alone, satiated but strangely hungry, I found myself wandering down the very lane that leads to Movidia, drawn there by the memory of sweet smoke and spice, the promise of good things. And there, in the corner, I spied a seat at the bar, a place made for one from which I could look out at everyone and everything. I hopped up on the stool, swivelled around, senses keener than ever. The barman sliced off a hunk of bread under the counter and put it down in front of me with a glass of tempranillo. Clear gazpacho with its tiny dice of red and green pepper was too pretty to resist leaving the very essence of late summer on my lips. Baby corn still in the husk with nothing but olive oil and sea salt to glisten and sparkle its pale tender kernels was nutty, richly corny and eaten too soon.

Then I picked my way through the menu eating as many as I could of the things that I hadn't tried on the previous visit, oblivious of my expanding girth. Pollo escabeche al Miguel, the ultimate chicken sandwich, with penetrating spice and a creamyish filling (though not excessively rich, thanks to a good whack of sherry vinegar). Heavenly. All right, I doubled up and had the wet lamb again. It's too hard to resist. Then things got interesting. I started chatting to the people next to me, a novelist and a teacher, and to the couple behind me, an IT guru and uni student and, well, next thing we were swapping forkfuls of rabbit – with a gorgeously salty exterior and meltingly tender middle – for forkfuls of tender barramundi and chorizo, and spoonfuls of shiny black mussels with a faintly tomato and paprika sauce for tastes of Valencian salad of endive, orange, palm hearts and manzanillo olives. At a mere nod of my head the barman refilled my glass. Well, I only had to stagger back the way I came to find my bed and it was a helluva lot more fun than dining solo at the hotel.

But there you are. I've run out of room to write about the Melbourne Food & Wine Festival proper, having gone off on a dining tangent – Massimo Bottura's charm and near-fanatical raving, the king of foragers (René Redzepi), the humble Ben Shrewry, and the day of fire will all have to wait.

There is more on Melbourne (and South Australia) on my website www.juliebiuso.com