

# Circuit Food

## Celebration Food

The coincidence of the party of the second part's birthday and the 5th anniversary of the surgery on my neck got us thinking of special celebrations.

The first round was Kable's at the Regent of Sydney. It is a light and airy space, sumptuously but comfortably furnished and thus suitable for middle-aged hip joints. Drinks and bread were prompt and the service excellent; both waiters within eye range, but not hovering, is a big plus.

We were four and did an entrée tasting. Leek soup, with fresh asparagus tips braised and dropped in, was delicious and creamy. Freshly shucked Sydney Rock and Pacific oysters natural with balsamic vinegar to dip in, and lemon, were simple and superb.

A Thai-style squid salad was cool, and hot enough with lemon grass, chilli and shallot greens. Best of all was a spinach tart filled with a scrambled egg and crab mixture. Delicious.

For mains, three had Illabo lamb roasted to pink perfection and served with yellow squash, baby roast potatoes and sugar snap peas. Conventional, but perfect.

I had barramundi pan-fried. It came in a "net" of potato strings, very finely cut and cooked into the fish, which was delicately fried and delicious, sitting on a skordalia mash and the same vegetables.

Bollinger by the glass, Leonay Riesling by Leo Buring and Yarra Glen Shiraz of 1991 washed it down.

We shared between four a chocolate mud pudding with de Bortoli Noble One "sticky".

A great meal, not too heavy for lunch time. Also not cheap (\$550 for four, including tip) but you only live once!

A different kind of celebration took Tamworth circuiters, plus a few, to Manfredi's new extravaganza at the Argyle Cut old Bond Stores. On the third level of Argyle Department Store, Bel Mondo is big, high-ceilinged, modern plus plus in eclectic style and, my only criticism, noisy. On the Friday of its first week it was packed, but the service was still attentive.

We ate at the table, not at the bar, and everything was cooked to order - so not quick. The deep-fried zucchini flowers stuffed with gruyere by Heidi were fabulous - crisp and very hot, which is the trick - soggy they are ordinary.

Others had a daily special of scallops in a Portuguese-style sauce of tomato, garlic, coriander and shallots which were excellent.

A stack of sweetbread slices pan-fried, crisp, but soft inside and not at all leathery, a brown sauce complementing perfectly, settled me down just nicely.

Others had the Illabo lamb which is the spring rage, roasted and good, and I sampled someone's roast duck which was crisp outside, pink inside and not oily at all. Wunderbar.

We drank Pipers Brook Pinot Gris (lots!) and Diamond Valley Cabernet and finished with a platter of great Australian cheeses. The bill? Ouch! \$1,500 for eight, including a 10% tip - but we were drunk!

A great-grandfather outing took a group of his best friends and the No 1 son to Encore at the Sebel Town House. Now this is a value bet with super service, valet parking and marvellous food for \$32.50 for two courses including selected wines until 3 pm - Basedow red and white in our case.

Superb were oysters natural with sour cream and caviar, hot and cold smoked salmon (sliced cold smoked and a piece of Tasmanian Atlantic hot smoked but served cold) and char-grilled scallops and baby octopus on rocket with a Thai sweet chilli sauce.

Of the mains, Western Australia red snapper fillet baked with ginger garlic attracted three of those who had mains and all pronounced it excellent. One had the corn-fed chicken char-grilled on tofu and didn't leave a skerrick. Glasses were unobtrusively kept topped up.

I think this is a new find of an old favourite, so if your ship comes in, or you have a big win, all three are great celebration places. For noise, Bel Mondo; for quiet, either of the others - but great, great food. □ John Coombs QC

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