

RINGMASTER AWARD

Fins, The Beach Hotel Byron Bay. Ph: (02) 668 55029

The great Australian culinary revolution is lifting food standards to great heights in the circuit towns as well as around Sydney.

Danny's Brasserie in Goulburn is great for grills and fish. The Workshop Café at the PowerHouse in Tamworth is now the best meal in town and, by the by, won the 'In-House Country Café' Award for 1999. In Newcastle, the Customs House is very good and The Chairman and Yip and the Ottoman enliven Canberra with the best of ethnic specialties. Selkirk's in Orange is 'two hats' standard in my opinion.

But the Ringmaster's award for circuit meal of the year goes to Fins in the Beach Hotel at Byron Bay (formerly of Brunswick Heads). A two-week circuit at Lismore took me to the hotel and all the beauty of the bay and the pleasure of bumping into 'Charlie' Crittle often during morning walks before surfing. (He walks long and fast: from his place to the lighthouse and back nearly every day, and that's three miles each way at least).

I had three Fins meals in the nine days I was there, and that speaks volumes. Brilliant char-grilled Jewfish cutlet one night, with a Mirin lime ginger and chilli sauce, snapper cakes with green papaya salad and spicy plum chutney another, and oysters opened just for you both times.

The best was an evening when the party of the second part and I shared a cataplana of local seafood: a brilliant Southern Portuguese-style dish with bugs, dhufish, prawns, mussels and calamari cooked and served in a fish stock spiced with saffron and star anise, with garlic potatoes in with the fish.

Now the trick is getting all the seafood cooked just right - which means just cooked. Therefore you must allow forty minutes for it to come and I am guessing they put the calamari in first and the mussels in last. This is a feast in a shiny copper kettle keeping warm but not stewing, and you serve yourself as you go. Absolutely magic! We ate the lot, after saying, 'We'll never get through this!' Nothing before and nothing after - only bread with it - even though I knew the flourless chocolate cake with vanilla bean and Cardamom ice cream was fabulous too.

We drank beer while we waited and an unwooded Chardonnay and Piper's Brook Pinot noir during this full-flavoured dish, both available by the glass.

Nearer to home, Cala Luna and the Fresh Ketch at The Spit, and Watermark at Balmoral, are doing superb work.

A great pit-stop for me!

ST PATRICK'S DAY 2000 *Edna's Table, 204 Clarence Street Sydney. Ph: (02) 9267 3933.*
Lunch: Monday to Friday. Dinner: Monday to Saturday.

One of the nicer traditions of the Common Law Bar has always been St Patrick's Day lunches. For some years the venue has been Edna's Table, formerly in Sussex Street, then at the foot of the MLC Tower - adjacent to, and overflowing onto, the courtyard - and now in Clarence Street.

None of us get there every year but we always try. This year Chris Hickey, my brother Jerry and I joined a Jack Shand table, led by O'Connor QC and Kennedy S.C. - 26 of us at the last sober count.

Always a noisy and green affair with pipers - 'Danny Boy' and so on - this year it was a food perv's delight.

Four courses for \$85.00 including introductory champagne and Guinness was very fair value, considering the quality.

The soup was 'Oscar Wilde Green Pea' with smoked haddock. Very green! Made on a fish stock, it was a superb and different pea soup with chunks of smoked haddock.

Next, 'Erin Green Valley Asparagus,' tender young stalks served on a bed of crispy fried very fine noodles with medallions of goat's cheese just basted with onion jam - a lovely mix of textures as well as flavours. For main course I had smoked pork neck on concannon potato (mash with crisp cabbage mixed through), boiled baby spuds in jackets and broccoli and beans, served with parsley sauce. Boiled dinner Irish style, very Irish!

I wasn't up to the sweets but they looked very good.

A New Zealand Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc, a sharpish Pinot noir and a very smooth Shiraz pleased but, with too much Guinness to start with, who was choosy.

Well done Janice!