

Warm bread and family fare



PICTURES: EDDIE JIM

Jane Faulkner

Zio's is the type of restaurant that debunks myths. First, there's no celebrity chef in the kitchen who is more interested in making fashion statements than innovative dishes. Second, it's unnecessary to spend millions on a restaurant fit-out in the hope it will attract more people to eat food that might be fine except "it's a bit of this, a bit of that or, mmm, not sure what that is". At Zio's, it's a different story.

Inside the two-storey terrace, there's an elegant, comfortable dining room, somewhat conservative and some would say old-fashioned because of the ruched curtains, and because there's not a lot of wood or shiny steel or hard surfaces. It's certainly not staid, though. The uncluttered tables are beautifully appointed with white cloth and napkins; nothing else is needed.

The clientele ranges from men in expensive suits at lunch to those, at night, celebrating mum's birthday, a girls' night out or a romantic dinner for two. They come to Zio's for some of the best Italian food and hospitality in town. The wine list is a good one but it's also BYO, with corkage at \$7.50 a bottle.

For 14 years, Paul and Myrto Recinella — he as chef, she leading the front of house — have earned a reputation

through word of mouth. And there's no better recommendation. Here's why.

It starts with the waiters: assured, professional and pleasant without faux pleasantries. Then comes the menu. It's a well-considered list of Italian fare that includes monthly specials to really take into account seasonal produce. The food is wonderful because choice ingredients are used; no cutting corners here. Recinella has good suppliers and in the morning his father might drop in with a load of home-grown or produced goodies — free-range eggs, herbs, vegetables and fruits.

One skill the first-year

apprentice learns is how to bake bread — it comes warm, as it should, and is just lovely. Zio's is all about attention to detail and respect for Italy's culinary traditions. There's no mucking around with dishes that have already withstood the test of time — an entree of hand-made duck tortellini (\$17.90) is incredibly flavour-some, lifted by a light butter-Parmesan sauce and a slice of duck terrine. Nothing else is needed.

Recinella's signature dish would have to be the six tastes of the sea (see below). A perfectly cooked steamed fillet of coral trout (\$29) is sweet and soft, with flavours such as soy

and ginger melding well.

It's all about understanding what ingredients go best with what herbs, spices and other condiments. In warmer months, that combination might be a salad of baby spinach, mixed with walnuts and gorgonzola, topped with sliced juicy figs, excellent prosciutto that has been cooked until caramelised, and dressed with an apple balsamic (\$15.90).

Desserts are mostly Italian favourites such as panna cotta, infused with vanilla bean and topped with caramelised orange zest and bitter toffee (\$12.90), or poached pears tasting of star anise, clove and vanilla (\$12.90).

**BEST CHOICE:
Six tastes of the sea, \$23.90**

This entree might be called six tastes of the sea but chef Paul Recinella makes up the platter of morsels

depending on what seafood has been delivered in the morning; he's generous usually adding an extra taste or two. There might be steamed prawn dumplings, steamed scallop, salt and pepper cuttlefish, crab claw, ocean trout gravlax with coriander, or lobster and prawn ravioli.



PLACE Zio's Ristorante
WHERE 14 Lansdowne Street, East Melbourne
TELEPHONE 9419 0252
HOURS Tues-Fri noon-3pm; Tues-Sat 6pm-late
VERDICT

An elegant, conservative restaurant offering some of the best Italian fare and polished service to suit all occasions. A reminder that quality lasts.
AMBIENCE 7/10
FOOD 8/10
VALUE 8/10

EPICURE ESPRESSO

John Lethlean

The inside stories on Melbourne's restaurant world.

Ups and downs

On the morning after the night before, there will be happy campers among the restaurateurs and chefs of Victoria. As always, however, some will not be so happy. *The Age Good Food Guide*, launched last night at South Wharf, often takes with one hand what it gave with the other. That's the nature of

producing a finite guide to what's going on and where things are — relatively — at.

As always, we'll take the glass-(of Domaine Chandon)-half-full approach.

The Guide has pumped steroids into the three-hat (18/20 and above) category this year, promoting three restaurants to its highest echelon to keep Flower Drum company. The Van Haandels' Circa, the Prince, Geoff Lindsay and Andrew Gunn's Pearl and Shannon Bennett's Vue de Monde have all been ranked at the top of their game. It's a big change from last year, when only the Drum and Stefano's received three (more later).

Four restaurants are newly elevated to the two-hat bracket, representing scores of 16 or 17. The biggest winner is probably Paul and JoAnne Mathis' Taxi Dining Room, which didn't even make the hat ranks last year: the M ichael

Lambie-led restaurant, which the *Guide* has dubbed Restaurant of the Year, has been awarded two hats and a score of 17. Elsewhere, the Healesville Hotel (Country

Restaurant of the Year), Robin Wickens' Interlude and the Park Hyatt's radii, under Anthony Musarra, have all scored a

second hat. Probably the most significant moment for many chefs and proprietors is their first hat for a particular restaurant. This year, that honour goes to Alevansi (see below), Ay Oriental Tea House and Simon Humble's Tutto Bene. All make their *Guide* debuts. More significant, perhaps, representing reward for effort over a longer period, is the elevation of Bacash, the court house, The Grand, La Luna Bistro, Punch Lane, Pure South, Shiranui, Verge and Villa Gusto. All were bumped from 14 to 15. Bottega, in Bourke Street, scores its first hat, moving from 13 to 15.

Then we have the descending restaurants. Stefano de Pieri's signature basement restaurant Stefano's, in M ildura, heads the list, going from three to two, meaning there are now no three-hat dining rooms outside central Melbourne. CBD stalwarts Hanabishi and Mask of China both dropped from two hats to one.

Perhaps the most significant drops are among those restaurants that have gone from one to none: Abla's, Akita, Araliya, Chine on Paramount, David's, Fenix, Harveys, Langton's, Mercer's, Middle Brighton Baths, Montalto, N ihonbashi Zen, Number 8, Oscar W's Wharfside, Pippies by the Bay, Salix at Willow Creek, and Sel de

la Terre. Some of those are bound to cause controversy. A great week to go overseas, perhaps.

Stop press

Sadly, long printing lead times mean information is inevitably

published in the new *Age Good Food Guide* that changed after

deadline. Sorry. Change is the bane of guide publishers. So get out your new 2006 *Guide* (you have bought one already, haven't you?) and pencil in these amendments. In the fluid world of restaurant personnel, they're as up-to-date as we can get them.

At Alevansi, Toorak, chefs Glenn Byrnes and Matthew Wilkinson have both left their jobs, which almost certainly would affect the restaurant's score. Their replacement is Jason Stewart.

At Attica, in Ripponlea, Ben Shewry recently replaced chef Nick Creswick.

At Bistro 1404, in Bentleigh, chef-owner Andrew Roscouet is believed to have closed the business, and will soon move to a new job with the Fenix crowd in Maribyrnong.

In Seddon, the Elbow Room changed hands very recently, reopening last week under new chef-proprietor Atish Chaudhuri, who says the "modern" tag remains for the food.

At Enoteca Vino Bar, in North Carlton, Luigi Buono has replaced chef Serafino Di Giampao I.o.

At Fenix, Raymond Capaldi has

handed head chef's responsibilities to Briton Spencer Patrick. At Walter's Wine Bar, Justin Cortel lino is about to be replaced by Dane Shaw, who departs Jimmy Watson's Wine Bar. Jimmy Watson's has replaced Shaw with his sous chef, Ben Isaacs. Soho, in South Yarra, is shut. At city restaurant Sud, Mark Taylor has taken over from Sylvano D'Alessandro.

And, at East Melbourne stalwart Zio's, chef-owner Paul Recinella has sold to new chef-owner Trieu Phan. Scary, isn't it? And that's only the ones we know bout.

The sweet hereafter

Several significant restaurants will open shortly in Melbourne that will almost certainly figure in next year's *The Age Good Food Guide*.

Not surprisingly, two are associated with the energetic and restless Paul Mathis, proprietor of Taxi Dining Room (among others). Upper and Lower House, at Federation Square, are about five weeks from opening. With a comfort-zone interior design by Maddison Architects, and finishes of cork, brass and oodles of recycled timber from Western Australia, the upstairs dining room will concentrate on high-end French bistro food. Downstairs will be the wine bar with snack foods. Mathis is also refining plans (again with architect Peter Maddison) for his new Melbourne Central venture, now to be known as SOS. Conceived as a high-end Italian restaurant using no meat in the kitchens — except maybe the odd anchovy — SOS will have an 80-seat dining room, a bar, a lounge and a garden terrace overlooking Swanston Street.

Longrain, beset by construction delays due to concrete cancer, is now due to open early October, according to partner Sam Christie. And Ray Capaldi and Gary Mehigan's the Boathouse, in Maribyrnong, has recruited chef Andrew Roscouet, formerly head chef at Matteo's. It heralds a new dining opportunity for the district. Expect an opening late next month.

For all the award winners, see our 8-page centre liftout.

