



I'll drink to that

Restaurant **BENTLEY** / Where **Sydney** / Review **John Lethlean**

WINE, IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER, does it? Restaurants are about food. Service. Amenity. And, let's be honest, most places believe their responsibility to wine extends about as far as someone writing a list and not much further.

And then you find yourself stumbling into Bentley one night, grabbing a smart, bare table, breathing in the undeniably sexy air of the remodelled room and realising that, yes, wine actually *does* matter a great deal. Not because you need it, but because a guy who happens to be an owner has made you *want* to want it.

Bentley would be renowned for its food if it only sold Toohey's New in pots; for the adventurous eater, co-owner/chef Brent Savage is really that good. His post-molecular shtick unpacks conventional bed-partners, finds new soulmates and flirts with a bit of increasingly mature, textural game-playing.

Technology plays its part. But Bentley is a true collaboration between chef and a sommelier who brings to the table massive enthusiasm for – and knowledge of – wine, tempered with humility. Nick Hildebrandt is not so much salesman as Pied Piper. He smiles, plays his pipe, and you find yourself following him down hitherto uncharted paths. Wines with stories, rooted in iconoclasm: rarely is the discovery of new food

accompanied by such pleasurable drinking. But, of course, restaurants aren't about wine.

The reinvention of Bentley has created a special space, yet one that still plays the role of flexible local. Degustation is only an option, while à la carte prices are reasonable. And for that you get unique and usually delicious dishes in a low-lit environment of black timbers, dark leather, crushed foil lights and early Freddie Hubbard. A new route to high-end dining.

Savage's food is not for everyone. Inspired by the modern Spaniards, mostly, it is clever and whimsical, but grounded, too. It's for diners who relish surprise. The highlights of his eight-course tasting menu? A fresh oyster, undoubtedly, with Avruga. It sits on a scaffolding of meringue

tubing; two are yuzu-flavoured, two squid-ink. Beneath, a mound of coconut mousse and splodges of salsa verde with a touch of anchovy. There is a textural surprise around every corner.

Cured and rolled confit ocean trout somehow gets a skin of bronze fish gel, a sauce of pumpnickel and shards of fish skin crackling, as well as plugs of trout mousse rolled in fennel pollen and roe in lemon oil.

Steamed kingfish, cooked first sous vide in oil, is Savage's "fish", while his "chips" are igloos of smoked potato mousse from the siphon. Raw pipis and mussels, in a garlic emulsion with samphire, may pay tribute to the jars of mussels from fish and chip shops of a bygone time.

A ribbon of thin-rolled, cured venison – like a strap of jamon – has spice notes and a licorice element to the sublime consommé served with it. There's scallop, salsify and chestnut too.

And rare-roasted duck breast – sliced thick and served in a kind of "curl" – is the surf and turf, or at least surf and pond dish: it gets almost-raw, crunchy cuttlefish poached in verjuice, witlof poached in a bay stock, enoki caps, a soil of dehydrated mushroom and confit garlic and, finally, cubes of konbu gel. A bridge too far? Not once you start eating it.

Lowlights? The sesame fondant spheres with pea puree inside (and various other running mates based on the same ingredients) was a little unsatisfying. And I didn't love a kind of reduced-to-the-extreme hazelnut custard crumbed with hazelnut, a blueberry meringue-like "whip", dehydrated blueberries and a white choc tube filled with yoghurt and berries.

There's no vanilla pannacotta on the menu here, let me tell you. But there's confidence: adventure; risk and, overwhelmingly, success. Oh, and wine. Lots of new wine.

Bentley reminds me of that line from *The Blues Brothers* about the place that does country and western. If you want food and wine, you know where to find it.

restaurants@theaustralian.com.au
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BENTLEY

Address: 320 Crown Street, Surry Hills.

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Hours: Tue-Sat, noon until late

Typical prices: entree \$24; main \$38; dessert \$11

tasting menu \$120

Summary: Bentley adds bling. Success follows.

Like this? Try... Urbane, Brisbane; Embrasse, Carlton, Vic; Amusé, Perth

