

FRESH START **Opposite:** The “veg-aquarian” menu at SOS includes a sashimi-quality duet of salmon carpaccio and tartare with olive paste and basil oil.

AT A CLUTCH OF BUZZ-WORTHY RESTAURANTS
IN AUSTRALIA'S SECOND CITY, CULINARY
INNOVATION AND EYE-CATCHING DESIGN
ARE HEATING UP THE DOWNTOWN
DINING SCENE

DISHING UP

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
CORY WHITE

MELBOURNE

BY RACHAEL OAKES-ASH

WITH ITS SEASONAL salmon and other

fishermen love the Pacific but love to eat it in

local restaurants and shops the west of the world

would get to it first. If you want a nice and healthy

for dining the west the best fish is from the west

the ocean that surrounds the west coast of North America

for dinner dining. There are many fish restaurants in the

with a few hundred miles of the Pacific's central location

detail about the west and the west coast. The best

like a look at the west.

A variety of fish is available from the west. The

but in 2012, the west coast with again

order of the fish is the best. A fish restaurant

the west restaurant, Richard H. Hines, is

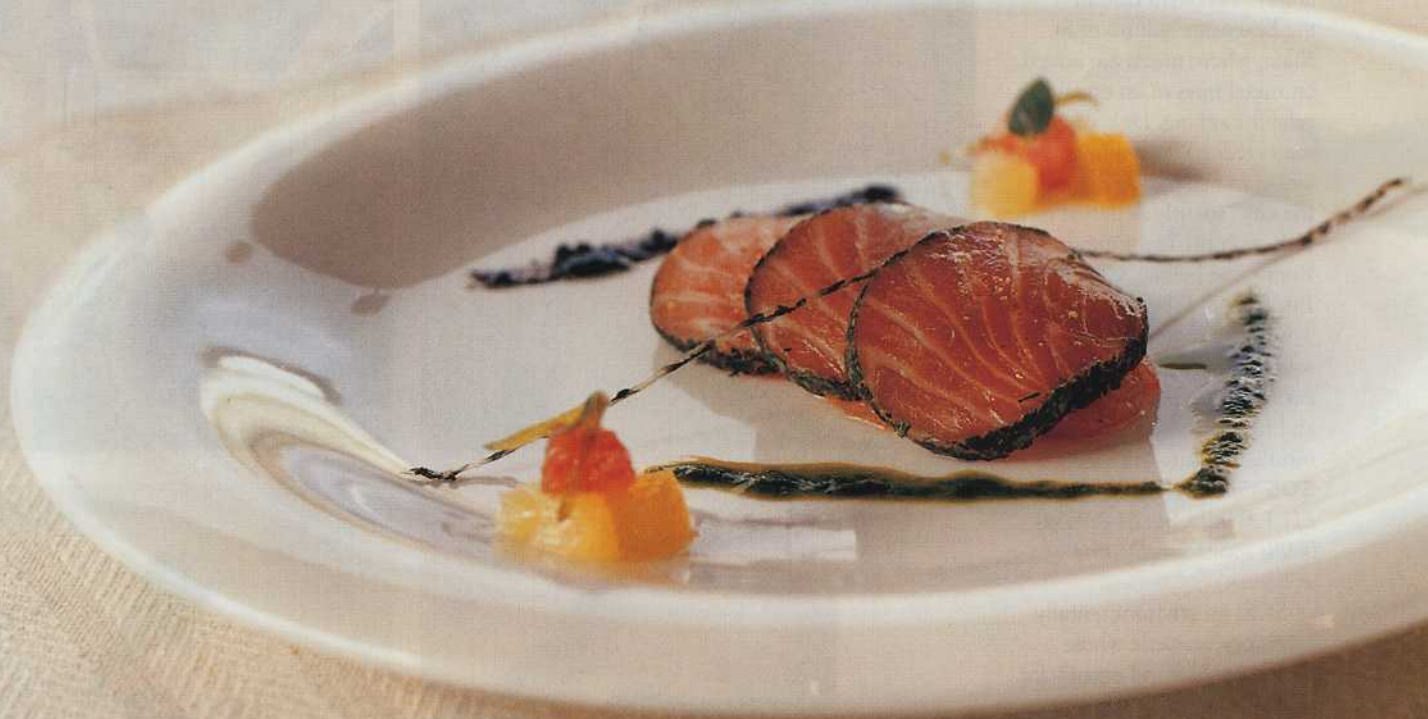
offerings: Visit the fisherman's website for more



THE WESTERN...
 OF THEM LINE...
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DINING WITH A CONSCIENCE

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WITH ITS SEASONAL climate and strong European roots, Melbourne has long been the driving force behind Australian cuisine (though the rivalrous Sydneysiders would beg to differ). Bracing winter nights are the perfect excuse for lingering late over fine food and even finer wine, while in the summer time, restaurants fling open their doors and windows for alfresco dining. There are more than 70,000 restaurant seats within a five-kilometer radius of Melbourne's central business district alone. It's a rich and bewildering variety, and here, we take a look at five of the best.

DINING WITH A CONSCIENCE

Restaurateur Paul Mathis put his name on the Melbourne dining map six years ago with the opening of Soul Mama, a quirky vegetarian café in the beachside suburb of St. Kilda, where meals are served on metal trays in an updated cafeteria setting. He's also the man credited for helping kick-start Federation Square, the city's smartly designed civic hub, with his Taxi Dining Room (see below), Chocolate Buddha, and streetside Upper + Lower House. This year, he sold that mini-empire to concentrate on Soul Mama and his newest—and perhaps most ambitious—venture, **SOS** (3/F, Melbourne Central, 211 La Trobe St.; 61-3/9654-0808; www.sosmelbourne.com.au).

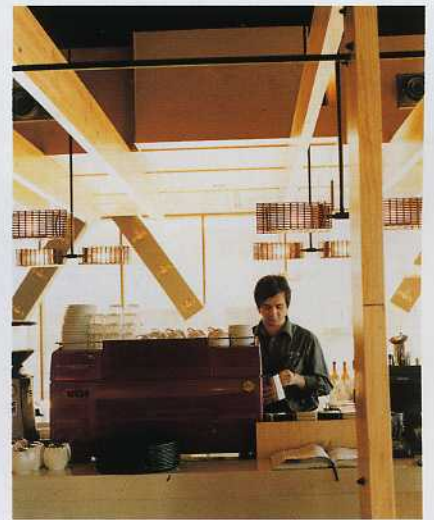
SOS, an environmentally conscious brasserie whose initials could stand equally for “save our seas” as “save our ship,” backs incongruously onto the food court of a downtown shopping mall. There's no signage marking this entrance, but it's not hard to find amid the burger counters and other fast-food outlets: just look for the paneled sliding door flanked by poplar trunks and river stones. Inside, the decor is an eclectic jumble of wrought-iron chandeliers, more poplars, a

retro red-and-brown patterned carpet, bee motifs, and three rows of communal tables, all centered on a striking concrete bar set under recycled pine beams.

The meat-free menu is equally as engaging—Mathis calls it “veg-aquarian” cuisine, and the emphasis is on sustainably fished or harvested seafood. Chef Ricardo Mommesso, who spent a year at the Michelin three-star restaurant Maison Troisgros in France, brings his Italian heritage to bear in the open kitchen, and clearly knows how to make the most out of his eco-friendly ingredients. The *gelato di parmigiano regiano* confuses the taste buds, but in a good way. Is it cheese-flavored ice cream or ice cream-flavored cheese? Pan-seared calamari with squid ink sauce and pea purée is served as a starter, but deserves to be a main. Also recommended



A MATTER OF TASTE Clockwise from below: The bar at SOS; foie gras mousse with apple purée, at Vue de Monde; a table setting at the same restaurant; Ricardo Mommesso. Opposite: Vue de Monde's Shannon Bennett.



SERVICE AT **VUE DE MONDE** IS WELL CHOREOGRAPHED, WITH WAITSTAFF CLAD IN BROWN APRONS AND DUCK-EGG-BLUE SHIRTS. SHOULD FOUR OF THEM LINE UP SIDE BY SIDE, YOU'D THINK THEY WERE A BARBERSHOP QUARTET



Vue du monde

are the ribbons of polenta pasta with borlotti-bean ragout, baby silverbeet cauliflower, and truffled pecorino, as well as spaghetti with wild thistle and slivers of Northern Territory mud-crab meat.

The only guilty dining here comes with dessert, and the luscious chocolate-and-lemon panna cotta in particular. Mathis has also done a good job with the well-priced wine list, which is arranged by region rather than variety, and creative cocktails are flavored with ginger, vanilla, pears, peaches, and honey. As the weather warms up, seats are filling fast on the outdoor terrace, so be sure to make reservations well in advance.

SHOW DINING

If dinner is the new theater, then oh-so-haute **Vue de Monde** (430 Little Collins St.; 61-3/9691-3888; www.vuede monde.com.au) sits right at center stage. After being ushered to the table by a maitre d' dressed in a spotless suit, guests wait patiently for the first act to arrive. Service is deliberately paced, so you have plenty of time to admire the tableware, like the tiny saucer with barely a pinch of salt in it, or its twin filled with not much more pepper. If you have a fetsih for cutlery, this is your place.

There's a great sense of occasion at Vue de Monde, and not just because the tablecloths are of crisp white linen. All eyes are on the open kitchen because it's been set up that way: long-haired chef-owner Shannon Bennett and his crew go about their business on a raised platform. For those who otherwise may have trouble getting a good look, an enormous mirror hangs at an angle above the service area, so that everyone can watch the theatrical plating of each course.

This is Melbourne's show dining, the one restaurant you go to if you're only in town long enough for one dinner. It's also one of the most expensive tables in town. Set in an old law chamber on Little Collins Street, Vue de Monde was designed by Elenberg Fraser, a firm with a sense of humor. Its courtyard—an excellent place for champagne on a balmy night—has an entire wall of tiny clay pots filled

IN A CITY **THAT IS MOCKED** BY THE REST OF AUSTRALIA FOR ITS **RAINY WEATHER AND COLD WINTER DAYS**, IT'S A DELIGHT **TO DISCOVER THAT THE BREAKFAST** MENU AT MR TULK INCLUDES A **CINNAMON-SCENTED PORRIDGE**



TABLE TALK Clockwise from above: Coffee at Mr Tulk; Andrew Kubale (left) and Peter Van Handel; Wagyu beef at Taxi Dining Room; prepping a table at the same restaurant. Opposite, from above: Taxi Dining Room; inside Mr Tulk.

with parsley, which diners who have indulged in too much garlic are welcome to nibble on to freshen their breath.

The restaurant's high ceilings are adorned with twisted light sculptures, while enormous square pillars bring a sense of intimacy to every corner. Service is well choreographed yet relaxed, with waitstaff clad in chocolate-brown aprons and duck-egg-blue shirts. Should four of them line up side by side, you'd think they were a barbershop quartet.

If you like to feel in control of your meal, you might be disappointed here. Bennett, who trained under Marco Pierre White and Albert Roux, has no truck with à la carte. He delivers four- to 13-course "gourmand" menus (or a modest prix-fixe menu at lunch) that reveal a classic French influence, with foie



MOVIDA
BAR DE TAPAS Y VINO

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gras this and truffle-scented that. But there are surprises, like a miniature Yorkshire pudding with pancetta and chickpeas, accompanied by a plastic ampul of duck gravy. Diners are expected to inject the *jus* into the pudding, then inhale. Palate cleansers between courses are served in test-tube style shot glasses filled with tomato consommé and gazpacho jelly balls. Dry ice ensures they overflow with mist. Showy? You bet.

On the night I visited, other courses included a corn taco filled with seared king fish, avocado purée, and caviar; risotto flecked with dark, musty Western Australian Manjimup truffles; and *ballantine* (a terrine-style dish) of rabbit accessorized with pistachio mousse and a regrettably tiny dollop of foie gras. Some of the dishes are admittedly over-the-top, but for a taste of

Melbourne's restaurant of the moment, showstopping *Vue de Monde* is the place to be.

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

Taxi Dining Room (*Federation Square*; 61-3/9654-8808; www.transporthotel.com.au) is a restaurant perhaps more suited to the flashiness of Sydney than to the refinement of Melbourne. A vast, glass-encased space overlooking the Yarra River, it has black and orange rubber floors, marble benches, and disco ball–like hanging lamps designed to flatter the designer-clad guests below. Consistently packed, the ultramodern surrounds are also surprisingly relaxed, from the ever-smiling servers to the anodyne tunes mixed by the in-house DJ. It's not unusual to overhear

conversations struck up between neighboring tables; odds are they're talking about the remarkable views.

This was Paul Mathis's first fine-dining venture when he opened it to mixed reviews in 2004. But since then, Taxi has acquired some serious buzz. Credit for that goes to Englishman Michael Lambie, who ran the award-winning kitchens at Melbourne's *Stokehouse* and *Circa* before relocating here to replace the original chef. Working alongside sushi maestro Ikuei Arakane, Lambie has crafted a modern Australian menu that somehow manages to fold both French and Japanese influences into a savory whole. Highlights include suckling pig drizzled with hoisin sauce, roast rabbit nestled against shitake mushrooms and shards of artichoke, and a richly textured soft-shell crab with fresh avocado and wasabi mayonnaise. All this earned Taxi the "restaurant of the year" distinction from the 2006 edition of the widely respected *The Age Good Food Guide*.

The sommelier is a perky woman from Quebec who knows her way around the impressive wine list. There's also a good sake selection. After dinner, head upstairs to the *Transit Lounge Garden* for drinks on the rooftop terrace.

(Continued on page 132)

TEMPTING TAPAS Spanish home cooking is the draw at *Movida*. Clockwise from below: The restaurant's interior; Frank Camorra; blond furnishings offset terracotta floors; smoked yellow-fin tuna. Opposite: Outside *Movida*.



STRONG ON **TAPAS AND IBERIAN WINES** (INCLUDING A CHEEKY RED FROM RIOJA), *MOVIDA* IS RUN BY BARCELONA-BORN FRANK CAMORRA, WHOSE PASSION FOR WHAT'S ON THE PLATE IS AS AUTHENTIC AS THE FOOD ITSELF

MELBOURNE

(Continued from page 117)

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

The Van Haandels are an institution in Melbourne. Together, brothers John and Frank have been at the vanguard of the city's gourmet scene for years, with restaurants like the Stokehouse, Comme, and the glamorous Circa at St Kilda's Prince Hotel. Frank's son Peter apparently shares the family penchant for setting up shop in heritage landmarks; together with partners Michael Benko and chef Andrew Kubale, he has opened a charming new café called **Mr Tulk** (328 Swanston St.; 61-3/8660 5700; www.mrtulk.com.au) in the State Library of Victoria.

Named for the 19th-century building's first librarian, Mr Tulk puts a contemporary twist on a bookish, antiquarian setting. Retro reading lamps hang above a communal dining table; books line the walls behind streamlined leather benches; wooden chairs mingle with deep-orange stools. Inspired by a large glass display case he spotted at a bakery in Milan, Van Haandel had a replica built for his own establishment. There's also a long copper bar, behind which a barista pours potent blends from Melbourne's own Grinders Coffee House.

Food-wise, Mr Tulk is all about unpretentious, quirky café fare. In a city that is mocked by the rest of Australia for its rainy weather and cold winter days, it's a delight to discover a breakfast menu in downtown Melbourne that actually serves porridge. And not just any porridge—a cinnamon-scented bowl of steaming oatmeal studded with sultanas and freshly chopped rhubarb.

Chef Kubale hails from a fine-dining background, but he burned out last year—at the tender age of 32—from stress. Following a skiing sabbatical, he's back in the kitchen, but this time with an eye to creating the kind of no-frills comfort food that he likes to eat at home.

Sardines are battered and served with salsa verde. Baguettes are filled with tuna or poached chicken, while flatbreads come toasted with pumpkin, salami, or meatballs. There are homey cured-pork croquettes and a delicious mushroom-and-parsnip soup, as well as an assortment of daily specials written on a large board. This is dining sneaker-style, where waiters

wear street clothes and no one walks away hungry.

SPANISH STEPS

Three years on, **Movida** (1 Hosier Lane; 61-3/9663-3038; www.movida.com.au) is as popular as ever, luring crowds to a graffiti-splashed lane across from Federation Square. The space is small but, like its tapas dishes, it packs a punch. A row of oversized lampshades hang from the ceiling above a taverna-style floor of terracotta tiles. The brick walls are painted cream and they frame blond-wood seats, amber-hued chandeliers, and Spanish movie posters. Blink, and you might think you've been transported to Barcelona.

Movida's main draw, of course, is its food: consistently good Spanish home cooking, with a contemporary flourish or two. Strong on tapas and Iberian wines (including a cheeky red from Rioja), the restaurant is run by Barcelona-born Frank Camorra, who honed his culinary skills in Córdoba and the Pyrenees before settling permanently in Melbourne. His passion for what's on the plate is as authentic as the food itself. Alan, the floor manager, has an easy bonhomie and when he tells you that the pork belly with quince aioli is sublime, you'd best believe him. It is; and so too are the aged sheep's milk cheese, the lightly cured ocean trout painted with beetroot foam, the oven-baked scallops, the spiced chickpeas with butter, and even the sourdough bread, among the city's finest. Make sure to leave room for the crème caramel flan or the *churros* (fried-dough pastries) with warm chocolate sauce.

Come Friday night, Movida fills up quickly, with queues down the laneway. If you're prepared to wait, it's worth it. If not, book a table for a mid-week lunch and take your time. ©

WHERE TO STAY

For style and convenience, the **Adelphi** (187 Flinders Lane; 61-3/9650-7555; www.adelphi.com.au; doubles from US\$420) is one of Melbourne's best places to bed down. Located up the street from Federation Square, the boutique hotel sports an ultramodern design and a remarkable rooftop pool. A nearby five-star alternative is the 311-room **Sofitel Melbourne** (25 Collins St.; 61-3/9653-0000; www.sofitelmelbourne.com.au; doubles from US\$340).