



Harbour crossing

The Burlington at Crows Nest is a boon for North Shore diners who no longer have to cross the bridge to enjoy Matt Kemp's European brasserie-style dining, writes Pat Nourse.

Now this is comfort. The Burlington, two large rooms on the Crows Nest street of the same name, is a north-shore reincarnation of Two Rooms, the two smallish rooms at The Spot in Randwick, which chef Matt Kemp's crew ran as a spin-off from Restaurant Balzac. Two Rooms closed its doors not long enough after opening in 2006 and, lo, there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth from locals. The problem wasn't the food, wine, service, value or, indeed, the two rooms. They were all just fine. The problem was that its 'Balzac-lite' style undercut the parent restaurant on price and they were only a hop, skip and a jump from one another. Now The Burlington introduces that same style of streamlined, British-accented European brasserie food to Crows Nest. It's an area heavy on restaurants, sure, but no one's doing this sort of dining at these prices. And it's a long way from Balzac.

The room is, in a word, comfortable. Neither cutting edge nor retro; simple, but with a warmth and life

to it that keeps it from feeling minimal at the same time. Jolly striped wallpaper on the one hand, and those oversized bulbs suspended unadorned from the ceiling on the other. Service, under co-owner/partner Lela Radojkovic, is pleasant; the waiters walking the line between cool-city polish and suburban friendliness in a manner that is entirely appropriate to the atmosphere. It's also the antithesis of those places where the chef refuses to allow salt on the table lest the diner interfere with his – and it's always 'his' – vision. This is not to say they're encouraging people to ask for the dressing on the side or the garnish from the chicken with the lamb (these crimes against culture should only be committed in the privacy of the home). It's more about opening up the ways the restaurant can be used, and it's done by dint of offering almost every savoury course in a large or small size.

"You can drop in for a bowl of soup, or you can do a full-blown make-your-own degustation," Kemp

PHOTOGRAPHY TENY AGHAMALIAN



Brasserie basics
The Aberdeen Angus rib-eye is served with a jug of beef jus, hand-cut chips and béarnaise sauce. The bread-and-butter pudding is given a Catalan twist, with cinnamon and a lightly brûléed top.

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told us when the restaurant opened. "You can use the restaurant however you want to." The wine list, too, has an emphasis on different serving options, affordable wine and sharing. The 10 whites (Domaines Schlumberger Pinot Blanc sits alongside Castro Martin Albariño and Leabrook Gewürztraminer from Adelaide Hills) and 12 reds (more Montepulciano, pinot and tempranillo-leaning than cab and shiraz-focused, happily) are listed in 250ml and 375ml carafes as well as by the glass and bottle. "So you don't have to be rolled out after drinking a full bottle of plonk if you don't want to," says Kemp. "And you can have a couple of tastes of different wines." You can also BYO in the early part of the week.

In keeping with the lower costs and more casual vibe, amuse-bouches and tablecloths are dispensed with, along with bread plates, though the bread itself is dark and lovely stuff, served with a nanna-style bone-handled knife. Cut straight to the chase with a white bean soup shot through with hanks of intensely flavoured prawn meat and little haricot beans. Some ras el hanout, the North African spice blend, adds a subtle note. A variation on the theme sees crisp, salty chicken wings enlivening a cauliflower cream. The truffle oil splashed over it is superfluous; a soup like this being better served, perhaps, by a fragrant olive oil or slash of sherry vinegar. You'd be pressed to find a better \$10 entrée in Sydney, regardless.

On the entrée end of the menu, there's a spaghetti that's chockers with clams and superfine dice of jamón serrano. There's a bit of warmth there, but the impression is more of red-pepper flavour than raw heat. Empanadillas see smooth, potatoey salt cod



purée enfolded in crisp short pastry. They're great to share, but would be a bit one-dimensional as a single course for a single diner. These touches of Spain and Italy generally take second billing to other influences. In some quarters of the hospitality industry, Matt Kemp is nicknamed 'the geezer', partly for his accent and unfailingly colourful vocabulary, and partly for his interest in classic English dishes and offal. The brawn at The Burlington ticks those boxes. They've now termed it a 'terrific of smoked ham hock and pork cheek', but its savour is exactly that of brawn; more soothing and jelly-like than livery and rich, with large pieces of carrot, onion and celery amid the hunks of meat. There's some rémoulade, the>

SYDNEY REVIEW

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classical preparation of strands of celeriac in mayonnaise, with it and little pig's ear beignets, looking for all the world like perfect tiny fish fingers. For all that pork it's a dish of some subtlety, and not at all the gut-buster it may sound. It also makes the perfect shared mid-course, and I rather fancy ordering extra to sneak away for sandwiches.

The kitchen's devotion to keeping different elements on the plate to a minimum is as admirable as it is economical. The bream, crunchy on the outside and served on a likewise thin, crisp potato and rosemary 'pizza' (earlier menus listed it as a tart), might err a little on the spare side. Barbecued spatchcock flavoured with thyme and lemon and covered with slivers of green olives, though, really works.

Then there's the Aberdeen Angus rib-eye on the bone. Whereas nothing else on the menu tops the \$30 mark, the steak is the exception, selling for \$42 for 500 grams and \$75 for the full kilo. We ask for the half-kilo, sliced to share, so it's not actually on the bone when it arrives but, much to our surprise and pleasure, the bone is brought out on its own plate. "The chef always likes to present the bone," we're told, deadpan. He also likes to present whopping hand-cut chips, a bowl of gentle béarnaise and a little jug of beef jus. The jus, unlike just about 100 per cent of other restaurants that serve it, is also worth eating and it is not, for once, horrendously, stickily over-reduced. Instead, it's beefy with a subtle touch of thyme. The meat is raunchily well-aged, full-flavoured and cooked and seasoned with aplomb.

Desserts are satisfying rather than exciting. Eton mess, with peach and blackberries one month, plums and raspberries the next, is fine but the smart money is on either Holy Goat's La Luna, perhaps the most interesting local chèvre doing the rounds, served with plum and clove paste and a nest of rocket, or the 'Catalan' bread and butter pudding. The pud is a staple



at Balzac, though the Catalan twist – cinnamon, and a lightly brûléed top – is new for The Burlington.

The Burlington is not trying to start the fire, says Kemp. "All we've done is ventured over north to try and offer what we offer in the east." And that's very comforting news: nothing more tricked up than good, accomplished food and service, at very good prices. And, if you like the idea of eating well in restaurants for a fair price, you'll want to come out and support them so they can keep those prices fair. "If the locals, who this is for, support it at the price it's set at, then the prices will stay the same," Kemp tells us. "Bring the covers in, come and put your bums on the seats, and I won't have to put the prices up. That's what it's about. Now get your arses down here."*

THE BURLINGTON

6 Burlington St, Crows Nest, NSW, (02) 9439 7888. Licensed.

Major cards accepted. Lunch Mon-Fri, noon-3pm; dinner Mon-Sat, 6pm-10pm.

Prices Entrées \$10-\$18; main courses \$18-\$42; desserts \$12.

Vegetarian One entrée, one main.

Plus Quality food, bargain prices.

Minus Attention to detail is commensurate with those prices.

and also...

MAKE SOME DOUGH

Pass the cherry, fennel, walnut bread and damn the carbs: Central Baking Depot is the newish city spin-off from Bourke Street Bakery, near Wynard. Its roast pork, coral lettuce, verjuice-mayo sarnies and chickpea and spinach 'sausage' rolls (not to mention the orange cream cheese brownies) are transforming many a lunch hour. 37-39 Erskine St, Sydney, NSW, (02) 9290 2229.

LUCA BRASI EATS WITH THE FISHES

Some of the combinations at The Codfather, a funky-up Stanmore fish bistro, are a bit out there – quince, stone fruit and walnuts with sand whiting, anyone? – but despite wondering what rabbit pie and blue-eye fillet were doing on the same plate, we were wowed by the quality of the cooking of each of the elements and pleased by the prices and the BYO option. 83 Percival Rd, Stanmore, NSW, (02) 9568 3355.



YO, SUSHI

Those lucky enough to try the new takemono menu at Yoshii over autumn were wowed by the soft crunch of Queensland-grown fresh bamboo shoots. But, at the same time, Ryuichi Yoshii's sushi making is always a revelation, no matter how many times you've witnessed his skilled hands work their art. The takemono's gone for this year but the magic's still there, so get down and try Yoshii's new winter menu. 115 Harrington St, Sydney, NSW, (02) 9247 2566.