



Universal appeal

Sydney icon Christine Manfield is back in town with clever, intensely flavoured food that showcases a world of tastes, writes Pat Nourse.

Christine Manfield, scrapbooker of tastes, bricoleur of flavour hits. Christine Manfield, the vocal, statuesque chef who ditched her primary school-teacher training to take up cooking professionally in Adelaide in her early 30s. Moving to Sydney, she worked with the late Anders Ousback briefly at The Wharf before joining Phillip Searle at Oasis Seros in 1988. With her front-of-house partner Margie Harris, she ran acclaimed restaurants at the Paragon and Phoenix Hotels at Circular Quay and Woollahra respectively in the early 90s before cementing her reputation with the fine-diner Paramount on Macleay Street in Potts Point. Closing Paramount in 2000, she stayed out of restaurants until the 2003 opening of East@West, a restaurant on West Street in London's Soho that was as notable for its food (I liked it, even if menu names such as 'Divine', 'Wicked' and 'Delicious' were a little hard to swallow), as it was for its brevity of tenure (L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon now occupies the site).

Her new restaurant, Universal, and her return to Sydney restaurants, has been conceived in some ways along more modest – or more casual – lines, but doesn't nonetheless flinch from nailing its colours to the mast. The restaurant looks onto the courtyard of the Republic 2 apartments in Darlinghurst. Wide and only a couple of metres deep, most of the dining area

is open, with banquettes spreading onto the square (with its Krista Berga bronze sculpture that looks vaguely like a portrait of a plump ballerina). The spice box and liquorice-allsorts comparisons that have been drawn by star architect Tina Engelen's design are apt, but for me it's more like a neo-bazaar, a corner of a spacey soük, and the roll-out, awning-topped, fair-weather nature of the set-up reinforces the vibe. Inside the plastic seats are like something you used to see in milk bars, only more chic, and padded for comfort.

Having been a pioneer of the tasting menu in Sydney at Paramount, Manfield has discarded both the degustation and à la carte idea in favour of one-size-fits-all small plates. They're not designed for sharing, and there's nothing by way of sides. (Manfield has, wittingly or otherwise, devised an almost totally carb-free menu, though bread is offered.) You pick the dishes – three savoury, one sweet is the recommended intake, though double-entrée types could probably get away with one savoury course fewer – and the kitchen puts them in the order they think makes the most sense. (They're listed on the menu in order of lightest to heaviest flavours, like a wine list, as it is.) I don't think the kitchen are out to mess with you, but you get the distinct impression they don't want you to be a passive participant.

Miss Universal
Christine Manfield's
new restaurant marks
her return to the
Sydney dining scene.



If you're thinking this sounds like an expensive way to dine, it is. Despite being the size of entrées, many dishes are up around the \$28 mark, and desserts are a high \$18. The 75ml 'tastes' of wine offered to match each course cost around the same as full-pours elsewhere. You can spend \$250 a couple without trying very hard at all. And that's before you factor in the very tempting cocktails from a list put together by former Lotus bar-star Alexx Swainston. I can't help think that if it were just a little less expensive, I'd visit a lot more. Then again, the no-borders, no-rules aspect of the arrangement makes it very flexible and just the thing for a few glasses and a few plates in the early evening or a nightcap cocktail.

But here's the thing: the food is really good. And the details, such as service (informed, stylishly garbed in black zip-fronted jackets, discreet) and wine (concise, interesting, very well matched to the menu), the ironed cloths and so on – are in keeping with the prices. There's also no filler on the plates. No potatoes, no rice, no chips, none of the things that normally allow you to recoup your food costs. It's no-retreat, no-surrender all the way, with full-bore flavours in just about every mouthful, pop, pop, pop.

Take dry-aged beef slices about the size of a twenty-cent piece, seared and topped with spiced flake salt, arrayed before a dollop of anchovy custard. The tiny crisp anchovies topping the custard are a wonderful touch (though their saltiness combined with the salt on the meat is a substantial saline hit). Or smoked eel and pomelo salad, smoke and citrus like a fire in an orchard by the sea, with bubbles of roe, all wrapped in a cool tongue of smoked ocean trout.

Tangy slices of duck smoked with jasmine tea are accompanied by ginger-pickled cherries and bitter greens one week, a lush, chilli-warm sludge of honey eggplant and a little crepinette of pork the next. The kitchen's deployment of Asian concepts is often



It's no-retreat, no-surrender all the way, with full-bore flavours in just about every mouthful.

unorthodox, but the flavours ring true, as with a larb-like salad of quail, tamarind and longan. The knife-work with the latter, too, is as closely observed as you'd expect of something that takes Thai tradition as one of its inspirations. The XO sauce enlivening juicy slices of suckling pig has a deep and true savour; a rich warmth from a good amount of chilli (something that's been tempered carefully enough, in my experience here, to not ride roughshod over the wines), and the accompanying green bean sambal make for an outstanding dish.

It's not all about Asia, either. The white truffle noodles (the truffle component being the flour) accompanying pale slices of porcini-crusted veal tenderloin and shreds of celeriac and morels are more middle-European than Hong Kong in feel. Veal sweetbreads get a very unusual treatment in their pairing with barrel-aged feta, but, with hazelnuts and matchsticks of apple along for the ride, it's a high-wire act that is pulled off with aplomb.>

Good tastes
Veal sweetbreads,
barrel-aged feta and
roasted hazelnut salad.
Above left: the lush
Raspberry Ripple.

SYDNEY REVIEW

And then there's the Murray cod. One of the nation's best table fish (and undoubtedly its finest freshwater catch), it has a flavour that can stand up to considerable outside influence. Here, Manfield plays a Spanish card. Teaming the small steamed fillet with a slice of jamón, a little orange and fennel, and dusting the fish with what I take to be ground dried olives, she offers a dish unlike anything in the Spanish tradition, yet one that recalls so much that is good about eating in Spain. Clever.

Speaking of clever, desserts are a highlight. They also cost proportionally more than you might expect, but plenty of work has gone into them to boot. I've been nothing less than wowed by the five I've tasted thus far. The hazelnut chocolate, caramel and honeycomb extravaganza that is the Universal Gaytime, the lush Asian tones of the Piña Colada, with its melding of star anise-accented pineapple, coconut and a cigar of pastry filled with pineapple sorbet. But the stand-outs have been the Fairy Floss, a blood orange curd with a salad of blood orange and strawberries, crumbled macarons and a strawberry sauce (I can take or leave the pashmak, the mop of designer fairy floss which tops it) and the skyscraper-elegant Raspberry Ripple, layers of good raspberries (a real rarity in Australia), tiny meringues and vanilla yoghurt cream, contained in a prism of clear toffee. Boldly good looking without being frou-frou, and flavoursome without being sweet, it's everything that made Manfield's desserts noteworthy in the first place.

Universal might just be Christine Manfield at her most relaxed. It's not an inexpensive restaurant, and the informal look and party feel may create expectations about the cost that the final bill will shatter. But it's fun, and it makes good on all its promises, delivering an experience that's grown-up, but still zesty. An exciting and rewarding new contender on the Sydney dining scene, Universal offers an opportunity to walk through a world of tastes in the company of a confident guide, and one I'll be taking up as often as I have the chance.*



Living colour
The main dining space.
Below: Smoked ocean trout, smoked eel and pomelo salad.



UNIVERSAL
Republic 2 Courtyard, Palmer St, Darlinghurst, NSW, (02) 9331 0709, www.universalrestaurant.com. Licensed. Lunch Fri noon-2.30pm. Dinner Mon-Thu 6pm-10pm, Fri-Sat 6pm-11pm. Major cards accepted. Prices Savoury courses \$19-\$29, desserts \$18-\$19. Noise Convivial, but not troubling. Vegetarian Three (strong) dishes. Wheelchair access Yes. Plus This is clever, intensely flavoursome food. Minus Pricey; the open room's a fair-weather friend.

and also...

LOVE YOU LAOS TIME

In our quest for good-value eating we've travelled out west to Lucky Thai & Lao Restaurant. Although they serve up faithful Thai classics, the Lao fare is where it's at. Simple monikers such as 'Laos sausage', 'sunny beef' and 'nam koa' – sour pork mince peppered with crisp rice bits and shredded pork belly fat – belie the fragrant complexity of each dish. Shop 3, 134 Edensor Rd, Bonnyrigg, NSW, (02) 8786 1997.

TASTING THAILAND

The degustation the Oceanic Thai guys are offering is pretty solid value. A \$62 investment buys you 12 courses of Max Mullins' smart takes on the Thai canon. His smoked trout nam prik, the prawn lon, the jungle curry of pork belly and the salad of cashew nuts, not to mention the intriguing salted beef dishes, are all key highlights, and quite a find on suburban Clovelly Road. 309 Clovelly Rd, Clovelly, NSW, (02) 9665 8942.



Oceanic Thai

WHO'S FIXING US UP

We at GT are partial to a quiet tittle and a snack after work and we reckon restaurant/wine bar Fix St James fits the bill perfectly. It has 30 wines by the glass – a solid list put together by proprietor and ex-Forty One sommelier Stewart Knox – and the food is up to it. We love the scallops with cauliflower, apple reduction and crisp pork skin. Dishes come in three sizes: taste, entrée and main. Right on. 111 Elizabeth St, Sydney, NSW, (02) 9232 2767.