

When Enmore is more

With Italian fare as its point of reference, Osteria di Russo & Russo aims high, shoots to thrill and admirably blazes a fresh trail for its neighbourhood, writes Pat Nourse.

Walk the Enmore Road of winter 2013 and you'll find a street not dramatically different in most ways, to the Enmore of 2003. Or so it can seem. Here's the Enmore Theatre, midway point for touring acts between club shows and stadiums. There's a framing studio with posters for *Easy Rider* and Fellini's *8½* in the window, ready for a paint-by-numbers hipster lounge room. Bins of raw kale chips and cashews line the windows of the Alfalfa House food co-op, while cords of follicles gleam on their racks at Fattou's African hair shop. The anarchists sit fuming in the Black Rose Anarchist Library and Social Centre, while a girl in a plush giraffe suit lopes past. The suit doesn't have a head, but the tail is impressive. So far, so Enmore.

Ten or so years ago the best eats on this strip were to be had at Kök, an eclectic Swedish-owned restaurant (the name, disappointingly, was pronounced "shirk"), Fifi's and Faheem Fast

Food, and the best drinking was done at The Warren View Hotel or, if you happened to be a lesbian, The Sly Fox) Faheem is still banging out the best and most brightly lit Pakistani food in town, Lat-Dior African Eatery has the most enthusiastic menu descriptions ("very tasty!") and the Fox is as sly as ever, but the food scene has changed, mostly in the past two years and mostly for the better. Cow & Moon does better ice-cream than anywhere for miles, Manoosh takes care of your Lebanese pizza needs, Doughbox wears its '50s diner drag with pride, and a slew of new bars - Bar Racuda, Waterhorse, Ra Bar, The Green Room Lounge and the superbly whiskey-scented Midnight Special among them - is giving the pubs a run for their money.

Hartsyard, opened last winter by New York chef Gregory Llewellyn and his partner Naomi Hart, has done more for the 'hood's food scene than anything in years. Its ambitious wine list and impressive fried chicken lifted the strip's sights, making way, hopefully, for more like it. This is a story of one such contender.

Back in the day the great Enmore stayer was Fifi's, a restaurant that introduced a generation of inner-westies to the joys of watermelon and haloumi for brunch and brought bistro panache to local Lebanese dining. On the same site today we find Osteria di Russo & Russo, an establishment with a name that's almost bigger than its premises that promises to do equally good things. It's the little restaurant that could.

Inside you'll find a room that could seat 32 if at least 10 of that number were on intimate terms. The notable features of the décor

are touches of nonna chic against a stripped background. The marble-topped tables are adorned with candles and cut-glass bowls of persimmons and chokos. The walls, sheathed in timber to waist-height, are sparsely dotted with thrift-shop oils and framed photos. Nothing quite so pat as a Tretchikoff print, but the Colosseum, Fort Denison and what appears to be someone's mum all feature. It's a room small enough to be dominated by the sound and scent of the coffee machine when it's running, but for the most part the soundtrack is provided by the old Pioneer turntable on the bar. Al Green and Dusty Springfield get a good workout on our visits, as do The Velvet Underground and Neil Young. The frequency with which the needle skips and scratches suggests the staff were all raised in the era of the CD.

So far, you're thinking, so Enmore. The wine we've brought is poured two-thirds of the way up our glasses. The bread rolls are best kept in case you need something to throw at sticky-faced urchins back on the street.

But at about the time when the neighbourhood's script would normally see the trio of dips come out, or the roast sweet potato ("excuse me, but is this tahini vegan?"), instead it's an amuse-gueule of wafers of swordfish loin, cured bresaola-style and paired with little dots of mandarin purée and powder. Cue the sound of the needle being whipped across the record.

Suspicious that Osteria di Russo & Russo may be harbouring good things to eat are confirmed by the wagyu bresaola. (Yes, more bresaola.) As it is, the sheets of cured beef, shot through with a

filigree of intramuscular fat, add up to one of the best dishes on offer, all that beefy richness played off very successfully against pickled shallot, cauliflower, carrot and baby leek. The unifying element is daubs of bagna càuda, the Piedmontese "hot bath" of anchovy and garlic, reworked here as something more like an aioli. The trick is to get a hit of everything all in one bite.

Speaking as someone who loves restaurants and is paid to write about them, I'm normally as attracted to restaurant risotto as I am to home dentistry. The switch is flipped, though, when the menu makes some sort of claim to the rice being cooked to order. And the Russotto, ahem, doesn't disappoint: the rice is wet enough to spread across the plate it's served on, and there's a distinct bite to each grain, but the starch is worked enough to make them hang together on the fork. The truffled pecorino is a lavish but sympathetic pairing with Jerusalem artichoke, and the garnish of crisp artichoke chips and watercress is as elegant as it is effective. The boy, you're thinking right about now, can cook.

So who is the boy? He's not one or the other Russo. I've encountered the younger Russo, the restaurant's host and co-owner, Marc. He's the friendly face of the restaurant, and the only member of the ragtag gang of lovable youngsters on the floor who seems to know how to wait a table. I'm assuming the other Russo is his dad and backer. The chef is Jason Saxby, a Bathurst boy who counts Pilu at Freshwater among his ports of call. He won the Josephine Pignolet award given to promising young chefs when he was working at Quay, and used the prize money to work at Per Se in New York and later at The Ledbury in London.

What you'll find here isn't Quay-on-spaghetti (though I rather fancy the idea of Pete Gilmore's pig cheek, shiitake and scallop number tossed through tagliatelle) and nor is it Pilu wearing a fancy hat. No more than Jason Saxby, as a chef, can be seen as the sum of his mentors' influence. It's not really Italian, either, but rather uses the idea as a way of narrowing its frame of reference.

The piccolo fritto, fried school prawns with cauliflower, though nominally Italian, reminds me more in execution of something you'd see in a tapas bar, its "salsa rosso" dipping sauce a cipher for romesco. The insalata barbabietola teams salt-baked beetroot, cumquats, radicchio and a crumble of rye bread in a manner than might be better received in Copenhagen than Catania.

The proteins down the heavier end of the menu are handled in a similarly modish way, relying on a combination of sous-vide and separate searing, mostly, rather than roasting, grilling or regular pan-cooking. This all but guarantees tenderness and retention of moisture in, say, a "rotolo" of guinea fowl stuffed with hazelnuts and mushrooms and paired with the sautéed legs and wings, puffed spelt and a chestnut purée, but at the expense of texture and intensity of flavour.

Flank steak takes similar bag-then-sear treatment, but in the version I'm served, the thin strips of meat barely hold their own against a burnt eggplant purée (call off the smears, we surrender!). The pair of bone marrow croquettes taste more of their breading than the little of their filling that survives the deep-fryer, but the

sail of radicchio crowning the whole thing scores points for audacity.

Olive oil-poached swordfish wants for texture and savour. Italy's soups, the chef tells us as he brings the dish to the table, are typically "boring and predictable", so he has solved this problem by taking typical elements of a Mediterranean fish stew (mullet, prawns, tomato, fennel, saffron) puréeing them, then pouring the resulting tepid froth over mussels, fregola, shavings of bottarga, fennel butter and the tepid, raw-looking rounds of swordfish loin. It looks like dirty rust, and apart from some bitterness imparted by the cured roe, the taste isn't far off either. Let's just say the boring, predictable soups of Italy win this round, and potentially leave a lesson in culinary humility for the kitchen.

But our man Saxby scores hits again when he's playing with pasta. The pasta he painstakingly makes by hand always seems to play second fiddle to his sauces, but the results are so consistently tasty it's easy to forgive. We could be talking gnocchetti Sardi, little fork-ribbed curls lolling in a duck ragù studded with mushrooms and smoked onions, or tiny hand-rolled rags mingled with a powerful but well-defined sauce of wild hare and ham hock leavened with Brussels sprouts, and decorated with beetroot crisps and carrot leaves. A hit - a very palpable hit.

And he's on equally confident ground with dessert. Take the transition, even: a composed cheese course that turns parmesan into a panna cotta plated up with sliced grapes, walnuts and a side of Sardinian flatbread. Nice. There's a playful spirit at work with

the quince crostata too. It's deconstructed into quince in the form of a roll-up of fruit leather, poached chunks, an icy quenelle, brown-butter zabaglione and slivers of almond. The "rocher", meanwhile, covers a plate with shards of fine hazelnut biscuit, milk sorbet, fragments of chocolate torte, gianduja mousse and cubes of milk jelly. It works.

A little restaurant with big ambitions, Osteria di Russo & Russo sometimes trips over its own feet, but is so completely lacking in front and so sincere in its intentions that it's hard not to like. It's not cheap, but the work is there on the plate, and it's gunning for heights seldom seen on this street. I'm confident they'll work out most of the kinks, and the rest will surely become part of the restaurant's particular charms.

When it's good, it's very good, and that's a big win for the neighbourhood. Go Enmore, go.

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Osteria di Russo & Russo

158 Enmore Rd, Enmore, (02) 8068 5202

BYO.

Open Dinner Wed-Sun 6pm-10pm.

Cards MC V EFT.

Prices Smaller shared plates \$16-\$24; larger plates \$26-\$29; desserts \$12-\$17.

Vegetarian One entrée, one risotto.

Noise Watch those decks, DJ.

Wheelchair access No.

Minus Occasional bouts of young chef syndrome, amateur service.

Plus Fun, friendly.
