

Ray's guide to eating and drinking in Melbourne

The culinary and cocktail scene in Melbourne is vast, and only food critics can know it all. The following is a selection of places that I happen to know and like, biased by geographical considerations. By all means try other places, and let me know the ones you really enjoyed!

I've tried to focus on slightly less obvious establishments. The obvious (high-end) places are, for example, on Southbank at the Crown Complex: Dinner by Heston, Nobu, the Neil Perry stable (Rockpool Bar & Grill, Spice Temple, Rosetta, the Waiting Room), and so on. They are great too. And, of course, there is Attica, which has cemented its place on the San Pellegrino list of 50 best restaurants in the world. You won't get in, unless you planned months before.

There are some "cheap eat" options near the end of restaurants/cafes list. The order below is otherwise arbitrary.

Bars

Be aware that hiding a cool bar down an obscure laneway or alley is quite the sport around here. Obvious is boring. But soon the obscure becomes the known and then a new obscure must be found. Strikes me that not having a web site would guarantee a level of obscurity, but possibly also a ticket to bankruptcy ☺.

I'm not much of a beer drinker, so most of these are cocktail bars. The restaurant list has some recommendations for wine bars.

Bar Americano (20 Presgrave Place, City): I guess this is still my favourite bar, despite my bartender friends Hayden and Kevin having moved on. Holds a dozen people or so, standing room only. Classic cocktails. Go early in the week to avoid a crowd. Great place to chat to strangers when not crowded. It's in a laneway off a laneway. Ambience: 1950s Rome.

<http://www.baramericano.com>

Black Pearl (304 Brunswick St, Fitzroy): According to this list, <http://www.worlds50bestbars.com/55bfd2f59f/index.php> it is the 10th best bar in the world. Try the gimlet. Ambience: leather armchairs.

<http://www.blackpearlbar.com.au>

The Everleigh (Upstairs, 150-156 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy): The same list hails this as number 25. Classic cocktails. Chat to the staff about what you like, and they'll give you suggestions. Afterwards, go downstairs to Belle's and have some Southern Fried Chicken with interesting wines. Ambience: dark and brooding.

<http://www.theeverleigh.com>

Bad Frankie (141 Greeves St, Fitzroy): All the spirits here are Australian, courtesy of the burgeoning national distillery scene of the last several years. You can read about who Bad Frankie was on the web site. A real meany. Try Four Pillars gin, and if you head out to Healesville to pat kangaroos, you can also visit the distillery. Oh yeah, Sebastian & Co also serve jaffles. Try the one with corned beef. Ambience: better after sunset.

<http://www.badfrankie.com>

The Lui Bar (Level 55, Rialto, 525 Collins Street, City): The bar associated with the fantastic high-end restaurant Vue de Monde (don't bother, you won't get in). The place to have great cocktails and bar food and watch the sun set over Melbourne. You go to the reception at ground level, and if your clothing passes muster they'll show you to the elevator. No sneakers, ripped jeans, sandals etc. No sneakers, physicists. Good leather shoes. Ambience: penthouse chic.

<http://www.luibar.com.au>

Seamstress (113 Lonsdale St, City): There are two bars, and I prefer the one upstairs. Try a martini or a penicillin. The pan-Asian restaurant is also good (but can be noisy). Ambience: Singer sewing machines.

<http://www.seamstress.com.au/prod/>

The Gin Palace (10 Russell Place, City): Look for the "gp" logo or you'll miss it. The basement bar for martinis. Before such things were outlawed, you could have a cigar. Ambience: subterranean boudoir.

<http://www.ginpalace.com.au>

Hihou (First Floor, 1 Flinders Lane, City): A great Japanese bar, with good bar food too, and some private nooks and crannies. Search for a doorbell at 1 Flinders Lane, and don't expect to find a sign saying "Hihou". They'll come down and let you in, unless the place is full. Not like that other doorbell place in Chinatown, Philadelphia, that wouldn't let me in because I didn't have my passport. Bah! Ambience: Urban oriental.

<http://www.hihou.com.au>

The Croft Institute (21 Croft Alley, City): Sometimes it's about the journey as much as the destination. You'll find Croft Alley off Little Bourke St in Chinatown: walk past dumpsters and street artists at work, turn a corner and go past more dumpsters, and you'll find the bar right at the end. Make sure you check out the street art on the way. Ambience: chemistry lab.

<http://www.thecroftinstitute.com.au>

Nant (Shop 3 Driver Lane, City): Nant is an Australian maker of single-malt whisky. I mention this one because I think my friend Hayden Lambert, once of Bar Americano, still works here. Sit at the bar and talk to him about neutrinos. Be aware, Australia's not the greatest place to have a shot of neat whisky in a bar, because it is so expensive (taxes) for what little you get by volume. Ambience: subterranean corporate.

<http://www.nant.com.au/nant-1821-distillers-bar-restaurant/>

Whisky and Alement (270 Russell St, City): The whisky bar of choice in Melbourne. Ambience: No nonsense.

<http://www.whiskyandale.com.au>

The Beaufort (421 Rathdowne Street, Carlton): One of our locals. Just a few minutes walk from the conference venue. It's an old pub turned into a kind of American saloon. Some beer, too. Ambience: Woody Creek Tavern, if you've been to Aspen.

<http://www.thebeaufort.com.au>

Markov (350-352 Drummond St, Carlton): Even more local than the Beaufort. About 5 mins walk from the conference venue. It's our hangout for draught beer (I have beer sometimes). Happy hour from 5-6pm Thursday and Friday. Go to the back section for beer, the front section for cocktails. Decent food too. Ambience: Carlton, with what look like Santa Fe-style scribblings on the walls.

<http://www.markov.com.au>

Builders Arms Hotel (211 Gertrude St, Fitzroy): An Aussie pub, run by Andrew McConnell. There are restaurants in the complex as well. Eclectic clientele from the gender continuum. Ambience: Pub hipster.

<http://buildersarmshotel.com.au>

Amelia Shaw Bar and Salon (280 Sydney Rd, Brunswick): That's "salon", not "saloon". This quirky art deco bar sits inside the Retreat pub in deepest, darkest Brunswick. Take a tram from the university up Royal Parade and Sydney Road. Try out the circular pool table with a pocket in the middle like a black hole singularity. Only open on Friday and Saturday, from 6pm. Ambience: pre-war decadence.

<http://www.ameliashawbar.com.au>

Restaurants (including cafes and cheap eats)

Movida and Movida Next Door (Hosier Lane and Flinders St, City): Two of my favourites. Tapas and Spanish food (no paella!) by Frank Camorra, with great sherries, wines and digestifs. You can book for Movida. If you don't get into one, try the other. Sit at the bar, chat to the staff. Hosier Lane is the epicentre of street art in Melbourne. You can get your wedding photos done there -- the underground becomes the mainstream; ah well, I still like it. Ambience: Warm, lively.

<https://movida.com.au>

Cumulus Inc and Cumulus Up (45 Flinders Lane, City): "Inc" does not take bookings for groups of 7 or less; just walk in. "Up" is listed as their wine bar, but also has food. In the Andrew McConnell stable; see below. European food. When I ate there, Heston Blumenthal was at a nearby table. Ambience: bon homie.

<https://cumulusinc.com.au>

Longrain (40-44 Little Bourke St, City): A Chinatown restaurant that serves excellent Thai and South-East Asian food. The drill is to walk in (no bookings for parties of 5 or less) and sit at the bar if a table is not immediately free (go early if you don't want to wait). Or maybe stay at the bar. Communal tables. I really like this place. Ambience: modern.

<https://www.longrain.com/melbourne>

Tonka (20 Duckboard Place, City): Hurray, modern Indian at last! Sophisticated, no kitsch. Melbourne should do more with the great cuisines of India. It is not just butter chicken and rogan josh, colleagues. I hope Tonka is the vanguard. Ambience: modern.

<https://www.tonkarestaurant.com.au>

Pastuso (19 ACDC Lane, City): Next door to Tonka, as Duckboard Place morphs into ACDC Lane, you'll find this Peruvian homage to ceviche, pisco sour and alpaca tartare. A great addition to the local scene, and part of the coming of Peruvian cuisine to the world. Not great for vegetarians. Ambience: modern.

<http://pastuso.com.au>

Saint Crispin (300 Smith St, Collingwood): One of the best modern food restaurants in Melbourne. Splurge on the 7-course degustation with matching wines. Go on, you would pay a lot more for this kind of thing in many other places. Before or after, go to the nearby Bad Frankie bar. Ambience: modern.

<http://www.saintcrispin.com.au>

Transformer (99 Rose St, Fitzroy): One of the better vegetarian restaurants in town. Behind the cheaper, more crowded Vegie Bar. Ambience: post-industrial.

<http://www.transformerfitzroy.com>

Town Mouse (312 Drummond St, Carlton): Great to have this establishment so close to the university. Fine food and very interesting wines. One of the best. Closed Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Ambience: Intimate.

<http://thetownmouse.com.au>

Embla (122 Russell St, City): Sister restaurant and wine bar to Town Mouse, with similar virtues. Watch what goes in and out of the huge ovens. Great bread that could not be more freshly baked. Fantastic wine list of boutique offerings from around the world. Ambience: Modern, lively.

<http://embla.com.au>

Seamstress (113 Lonsdale St, City): Pan-Asian, in the same building as the bar. Excellent food, but can be noisy. Good fun, though. Ambience: Former textile factory.

<http://www.seamstress.com.au/prod/>

Supernormal (180 Flinders Lane, City): From Andrew McConnell, inspired by Asia's megacities: Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai and Hong Kong. Choose your own share plates or let them do the thinking for you. Open all day from 11am. Ambience: modern.

<http://www.supernormal.net.au>

Cutler & Co (55-57 Gertrude St, Fitzroy): The high-end restaurant from Andrew McConnell. You have a chance of getting in this one – try early in the week. European food, individual style. Ambience: Fitzroy grunge glam.

<http://cutlerandco.com.au>

Izakaya Den (114 Russell St, City): Look for stairs to a basement. Indications to its existence are otherwise subtle. Great upscale izakaya. Try the Kurobuta pork. Good cocktails too – I like the Den Negroni. Sister to the bar, Hihou. Ambience: modern.

<http://www.izakayaden.com.au/index.html>

Gazi (2 Exhibition St, City): The Greek classics done well in a modern, lively setting. Ouzo. Cocktails. From well-known chef George Calombaris, who also runs the high-end Press Club in the same building (haven't been there) and a couple of Hellenic Republics (Brunswick and Kew: google them and take a tram). Ambience: Modern, spirited.

<http://www.gazirestaurant.com.au>

Lee Ho Fook (11-15 Duckboard Place, City). Sophisticated modern Chinese, near Tonka and Pastuso. Ambience: Actually, I've only eaten at its former address in Collingwood, so I dunno.

<https://www.leehofook.com.au>

The Roving Marrow at the Astor (418 Lygon St, Carlton). Another local, recently converted from traditional to gastro pub. They serve really skilful share plates, with some very interesting vegetarian choices. A very welcome addition to the 'hood! And don't confuse it with the Astor cinema in St Kilda. But if you do wind up in St Kilda by mistake, make sure you pat Duke the cinema cat. Ambience: modern pub.

<http://www.theastorcarlton.com.au>

Belle's Hot Chicken (150 Gertrude St, Fitzroy): **Cheap Eat**. Southern fried chicken, as hot as you freaking want it, for \$16. The chef, who has worked at high-end restaurants around the world, aims to serve good food and a small range of interesting wines without maxing out your credit card (the wines are not cheap, though). Downstairs from The Everleigh cocktail bar. I go here a lot. Ambience: Diner.

<http://belleshotchicken.com>

DOC Pizza and DOC Espresso (295 Drummond St and 326 Lygon St, Carlton). **Cheap Eat**. Real Italian amongst the kitsch of Lygon Street. The pizza place is the best one near the university. Beware, gets very noisy inside. Espresso is a nice place for a sandwich and coffee at lunch time, or for an early evening Aperol spritz with stuzzichini. Also has excellent pasta (not completely cheap, though). Ambience: Prestissimo.

<http://docgroup.net>

Tiamo and Tiamo 2 (303-307 Lygon St, Carlton). **Cheap Eat**. A Carlton stalwart, 3 mins from the conference venue. Decent, home style Italian comfort food. Ambience: 1970s Lygon St.

<http://www.tiamo.com.au>

Pellegrini's Espresso Bar (66 Bourke St, City). **Cheap Eat**. Ah, what would Melbourne be without it? Helped bring espresso coffee to Melbourne decades ago. Décor has not changed, and nor should it. Faded autographed celeb photos. Mama's Spaghetti Bolognese. Cakes. Crème caramel. Fruit cup. No booze. World-weary service. May it live forever. Ambience: Faded 1-d espresso bar. (No website.)

Brunetti (380 Lygon St, Carlton). **Cheap Eat.** A Carlton institution, now gone international. Desert mecca. Panini. Coffee. Aperitivo. Pasta, pizza down the back. An experience. Ambience: frenetic.

<http://brunetti.com.au>

Birmingham Hotel (333 Smith St, Fitzroy). **Cheap Eat.** A real Aussie pub. Sports. Anyway, it's in this list because of the "parma", the classic Aussie pub grub. Melted parmigiano with a tomato sauce over chicken, usually. Has the same cultural significance here as the burger does in the US. Tuesday is parma night, meaning \$10-\$12 per dish. I confess I have not partaken, but our former postdoc James Barnard says it is the best parma in town! Ambience: haven't been!

<http://birminghamhotel.com.au>

Don Tojo (164 Cardigan St Carlton). **Cheap Eat.** Japanese fast food catering to students. Something on rice for about \$10. Ambience: student hangout. (No website.)

Hey, there are zillions of other Asian-style student-oriented **cheap eats** down the Swanston St spine from the University to the City. You can't miss 'em.