



2013

HOT 50 RESTAURANTS

By John Lethlean and Necia Wilden

These things are meant to be easy. Certainly in 2012 the choice of Hottest Restaurant was a simple one: Momofuku Seiobo in Sydney. Not this year. It hasn't been so much a case of "dumbing down" as "dining down"; the hybridisation of bars and restaurants, the migration to ultra-simple eating houses by chefs steeped in the values of Big Night Out dining, and the financial reality for many that there is more money in flash fast food than foie gras. And closures? Yes, there were a few. The restaurant industry has always



SIXPENNY

Stanmore, Sydney

Scandinavia in Stanmore might be the subtitle of this sweet yet seriously ambitious venue that draws its cues from Danish restaurant Noma and its produce from the chefs' own farm in Bowral. This winter's menu starts with paper-thin sweet potato crisps reminiscent of salt-and-vinegar Smith's, a jarring awakening of the senses, soothed immediately by a new-age cup of fresh curd with carrot puree. Tiny potato scallops provide some fun before a six- or eight-course degustation begins in earnest. Don't expect theatrics; rather, carefully chosen ingredients that lounge artily on taupe-hued plates are enhanced by quirky micro-herbs and sensitive

cookery. Returnees may find the new menu of chefs James Parry and Daniel Puskas less flashy than last year's debut list; only the standout mud crab and macadamia dish remains, now sans camomile and with more nut.

Compensation is found in gloriously sticky pork jowl with a baby cos leaf, and buttery Murray cod with sweet potato leaves; revelations both. Gone, too, are the mini Monte Carlos to finish – a misstep, surely? New sommelier Sebastian Crowther makes amends with much charm and a wine list packed with curiosities. The small, mock-Nordic room is pared-back and effortless.

Must-eat: mud crab with macadamia
 ← sixpenny.com.au

NEW ENTRY

THE FISH HOUSE

Burleigh Heads, Queensland

In a region not exactly known for interesting restaurants, two stand out, both run by the same person. No coincidence, then. At Hellenika, Simon Gloftis gave the Gold Coast the Greek you wish you had in your town; at Fish House, he may just have done it again with a gloriously unpretentious yet stylish house of hospitality focused squarely on seafood, of which the region has plenty. It is this ability to deliver a contemporary experience – strong service, excellent wine lists and up-to-the-minute attention to detail – without attitude or inner-city superciliousness that makes these restaurants stand out as instant classics, ones that will last. Here it is fresh seafood, treated with respect, that almost beats the view across the water. Delicate fillets served raw with oil and lemon; pasta with tomato/lemon "salsa" and bug meat of impeccable quality; and retro classics such as the 10-prawn cocktail with a glorious Marie Rose sauce. And then there's the daily selection of whole fish, maybe char-grilled, or pan fried or baked, like a tiger

flathead, in a rich tomato sugo with bay and thyme. It's respectful cooking. The Fish House wine list puts a lot of big-city restaurants to shame.

Must-eat: thin spaghetti with bug meat
 ← thefishhouse.com.au

NEW ENTRY

MOCAN & GREEN GROUT

New Acton, ACT

Anyone who's been paying attention can tell you our dowdy national capital has undergone something of a hipster-revolution in recent years, and nowhere is this more prominent than in the inner north enclaves of New Acton and Braddon. That's thanks to the arrival of places like Mocan & Green Grout, a cosy, tucked-away restaurant in a residential/commercial precinct. With warm wood-panelled walls, bric-a-brac and mismatched furniture organised around a large communal kitchen, Mocan makes you feel like you're a guest in someone's home. This self-proclaimed "ethical cafe", which grew out of an espresso bar, is about as far as you can get from the large south-side restaurants favoured by politicians for decades. Chef Sean McConnell serves up a collection of shared dishes – about two entrees, seven mains and a couple of desserts – and the menu changes daily or weekly. The Wapengo lake rock oyster, speck and housemade HP sauce is an inventive spin on the old oyster Kilpatrick, bursting with flavour. Move on to Boxgum grazing pork belly, with eggplant, miso and crispy enoki, or a winter crowd pleaser of buckwheat polenta, mushrooms, hazelnuts and sage. And who needs a licensed restaurant when the BYO corkage is only \$10? On a frosty night in Canberra, homely and inviting Mocan is a great place to seek refuge.

Must-eat: King George whiting with parsnip, fregola, fennel and capers
 ← mocanandgreengrout.com