



The tables have turned

Minimalist trends have given way to sumptuous surrounds, old-school steaks, afternoon teas and the traditional Sunday lunch, writes SUE BENNETT

In the world of food and drink, things never stay the same for long. Sometimes, if you blink between courses, you'll miss the change. Apart from the decor, the food styles also change. And it's not just restaurants that move with the times. Bars, drinks, even Sunday lunch all take on subtle differences with each year. And this year has proved to be a time of sumptuous restaurants, steaks and food labelling.

RESTAURANTS

Where did all the white walls and concrete floors go? They're still there but minimalism is becoming thin on the ground at recent restaurant openings. Sumptuous dark brown colour schemes, thick carpets and faux marble bars are much more in evidence. The Kirketon Dining Room and Bar, Darlinghurst, and Pony in The Rocks typify the new.

In the kitchen, when times are good and the tills keep ringing in the dining rooms, restaurateurs often take the view that there is little point in fixing what isn't broken. So, on the menus, innovation is less in evidence.

FLYING HIGH

There used to be a golden rule about avoiding eating anywhere that revolved or was on the water. But that's changing as the city's two principal revolving restaurants consolidated their venues as more than fine places to dine. After a bumpy start, 360 at the top of Sydney Tower acquired new owners and laid low for a while. It confirms its new colours with a glitzy New Year's Eve six-course dinner.

At Summit restaurant, which turns at the top of Australia Square, chef Michael Moore — a regular on Kerri-Anne Kennerley's morning TV show — reflects a strong Sydney trend focusing on red meat; steak in particular.

One of his menu items shows how obsessed we've become: "Bistecca black angus T-bone, 600g, 150 days on grain."

STEAKS



After years of being wary of red meat, consumers are regaining the taste. It's the same at home, as well as dining out. Bucha restaurant, specialising in grilled meats, opened its doors several months ago.

The owners transported an original butcher's shop from Argentina for the fittings — lock, stock and barrel — complete with an enclosed beef ageing cabinet, which greets diners at the Darlinghurst venue. Not for the vegetarian.

BANANAS

We all know where bananas come from but could we afford them? No. For much of 2006 that lunchbox staple became more expensive than fillet steak.

BARs



Glitz and bling has extended to bar openings. There's the sumptuous gold leaf-decorated

De Nom bar with its reproduction French furniture and lavish fittings, and the French-themed Bambini Wine Room. Recently the former Ancient Briton Hotel, Glebe, held its official opening for the venue that boasts a 9.5-metre fishtank bar, a lighting feature like a lily pond, an ornate antique clock, and a cocktail on the bar with a \$16,800 price tag. They throw in the diamond bracelet with the drink. The old student/backpackers' hangout is now known as the AB Hotel.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



Recently fish merchants and fruit and vegie stores have had to display where produce is grown. The new rules extend to Australian products, so all fresh fruit, vegetables, seafood and dried nuts must now show a country of origin.

MORE CONFUSION

While those labels are straightforward, the same cannot be said for much of the nutritional information on packaged goods. As the obesity crisis grows more serious, with countless talkfests but little meaningful action, a group of food manufacturers has moved in with its own front-of-pack labels. They show how much of the food should be eaten daily but the innovation is suspected as a bid to stave off stricter government labelling rules.



EXTRA AND ADDED

The question is, does anyone really know what the existing nutritional labels are all about and how they should be used by consumers? The question extends to all the value-adding of foods.

It's now almost impossible to find a yoghurt that's not devoid or low in something (most commonly fat) and milks are joining in. Aussie pasta company San Remo joined the party, introducing an Extra range, with added omega-3, iron and folate along with supplementary fibre and protein. And the packet has a 98 per cent fat-free sticker too.

FAIR TRADING

Moving right back to the start of the food chain, people have become increasingly concerned a how much farmers in developing countries receive for their labours. Coffee and chocolate are the two biggest areas of concern.

Fair Trade, set up to ensure farmers received a reasonable price for produce, has issued about 80 licences in Australia, and about \$4 million worth of goods are sold each year. This year, the Fair Trade Coffee Cafe opened in Glebe, and only sells coffee from PNG, East Timor and Peru, giving growers a fair cut.

BEERS AND WINES



Crown Lager has a new look and a twist top. Specialist beers are becoming more popular and wine has gone into a Tetra Pak. Cheviot Bridge's Long Flat wines (\$8.99 for one litre) arrived just in time for summer picnics. The packaging is new to Australia, but over the past year 1.5 billion litres of wine has been poured from Tetra Paks globally. Cabernet merlot and semillon sauvignon blanc are the choices here.

As farmers suffer, consumers are the winners as the grape (wine) glut worsens. There have been some stunning bargains in red wine and they are not necessarily obvious without drinking. The excess grapes have meant far superior wine has been making its way into cheap bottles.

AFTERNOON TEA

That most English of traditions has come to Sydney in a big way, most remarkably at the altar of modernity, the Opera House. Executive chef of the fine dining Bennelong Restaurant, French-born Guillaume Brahimi, recently introduced a high tea with divine sandwiches, sweet macaroons and strawberry tarts.

The Sofitel Hotel, Sydney, sent chief pastry chef Mark Stone to Paris, where he learned the fine art of making the celebrated French Lenotre company's pastries and cakes. He's now making them for afternoon tea at the Sydney Hotel. Stone's

flourless chocolate cake had a cameo role (along with its creator) in the blockbuster *The Matrix Reloaded*.

SUNDAY LUNCH

In Australia a couple of months ago, Jamie Oliver spoke out about the importance of family life saying weekends are sacrosanct, for his wife, Jools, and their two daughters. More than that, they insist on the family eating together. The absence of shared meals in family life has become a recurring theme with its absence blamed for everything from obesity to teenage misbehaviour.

Another celebrated British chef, Gordon Ramsay, has gone one step further and produced a book, *Sunday Lunch*, full of family recipes. "When you have a vast, changing world and everyone comes up with bulls..t excuses about how they have to eat breakfast on the

way to work and have dinner in front of the television, it's all crap," he says in typical Ramsay fashion.

"Sunday lunch is just one hour of a week and it's just a lot of fun. In terms of etiquette and manners it's good for the kids, it's confidence boosting if one of the kids has had a bad week and it's you having fun with your wife as a family."

meal plan

A frittata is an Italian-style omelette cooked open rather than folded like a traditional omelette. Traditional frittatas are oven-baked but it's quicker — and the result just as tasty — to start the dish on the stove and then finish it off under the oven grill. If your frying pan has a plastic handle make sure you wrap it well with foil before transferring the pan to the grill.



Prep time: 8 minutes

Cooking time: 18 minutes

Serves: 4

1 tbsp olive oil

175g sweet potato, peeled and shaved into ribbons

1 onion, sliced

125g button mushrooms, sliced salt and cracked black pepper

7 eggs

¼ cup grated parmesan

2 tbsp basil leaves

- 1:** Heat the oil in a medium-sized oven-proof frying pan over medium low heat.
- 2:** Add the sweet potato and onion and cook for 6-8 minutes or until softened.
- 3:** Add the mushrooms and cook for a further 5 minutes. Lightly whisk the eggs with the salt and pepper and pour over the sweet potato mixture.
- 4:** Turn heat to low and cook for 10 minutes or until just set. Sprinkle with parmesan and place the pan under a hot grill until the top is golden.
- 5:** Sprinkle with basil leaves and serve in wedges.



Changing tide ... the Kirketon's James Ingram. The restaurant has rejected a stark look for more elaborate decor; and (below) Jamie Oliver has declared Sunday lunch absolutely sacrosanct for his family.
Pictures: FRANK VIOLI and TOBY ZEFRA

