

— APRIL —

# REVIEW

## Dining out

This month, we visit an Italian-inspired Central Coast fine diner, a coastal newcomer in the west, a glitzy multi-faceted restaurant in South Yarra and a revamped Med star in Port Willunga.

Osteria Il Coccia

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PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID LI





THE NEWCOMER  
Busselton,  
WA

QUICK LOOK

3/55 Queen St,  
Busselton, WA  
[bookings@albertas.  
com.au](mailto:bookings@albertas.com.au)

CHEF Ben Ing

OPENING HOURS

Lunch Sun;  
Dinner Thu-Sat

PRICE GUIDE \$\$

BOOKINGS

Recommended.

VERDICT

The west's one  
to watch.



Clockwise from left: Alberta's Ben Ing and Kirsty Marchant; octopus Almondine, green beans and preserved Tahitian lime.

# ALBERTA'S

A freewheeling newcomer combines global dining pedigree with love for its hometown, writes MAX VEENHUYZEN.

Let's get it out of the way: Kirsty Marchant and Ben Ing, the life and business partners behind Alberta's, both worked at Noma. When reports surfaced that the former head gardener (Marchant) and head chef (Ing) of one of the world's most watched restaurants were floating around WA, locals – unsurprisingly – had questions. Where were they living? What were they doing? Could they get me a table at you-know-where? With the opening of this breezy 50-seater in the coastal hub of Busselton last June, the couple answered many of those questions while prompting some new ones, not least “why Busselton?”

Beyond being familiar to Marchant – she grew up in Perth and holidayed “down south” as a kid – Busselton was somewhere that two 30-somethings

could open their first hospitality venture without needing a Scrooge McDuck-type backer. Crucially, calling Busso home means they were close to local produce and producers: the stars of Alberta's focused blackboard menus.

When Alberta's opened, it was all about brunch and coffee. Triticale wheat was baked into morning buns that were warmed on the hearth and served with a hard ewe's cheese from Cambray Cheese. Warming broths coaxed maximum flavour out of local chicken, kelp and yuzu. Tasty stuff, but perhaps not representative of what Ing could do. Now that Alberta's has shifted to lunch and dinner, we're getting a better sense of his range. The signs are very promising.

Beyond a zealous commitment to regional ingredients, the menu's

constant jolts of acidity speak loudest to Ing's Copenhagen era. An electrifying mustard-seed mayo offers a cool contrast against rare-grilled flank steak. Dense tiles of raw tuna loin are presented on a vivid salsa verde, thick with herbs and preserved Tahitian limes from nearby Gunyulgup Farm. Minced eggplant folded through clouds of fresh cheese suggests baba ghanoush and ricotta should hang more often.

And so it goes, right through to an assured send-off starring pristine cut nectarines, served room temp and finished with lemon oil. It's a package that feels very wine bar-y in its immediacy, just minus the wine (imagine if there were more BYO restaurants like Alberta's!). Chummy, engaged service led by Marchant is another draw, while the space's stripped back aesthetic, fast-moving open kitchen and approachable prices also help guests feel at home.

Marchant and Ing certainly aren't the first couple to open a small place on their own. But at a time where flashy restaurant “concepts” are all the rage, their earthy DIY approach is a likeable flashback to an era not so trend-driven. While pedigree will no doubt get many guests through the door, it's Alberta's understated cooking and charming hospitality that's going to keep them there. A welcome addition to the dining scene out west. ●



THE DESTINATION  
Ettalong  
Beach,  
NSW

The dining room at Osteria Il Coccia. Above right: quail with fermented garlic, frisée and cacciatore salsa.

#### QUICK LOOK

49 The Esplanade,  
Ettalong Beach, NSW  
[osteriailcoccia.com.au](http://osteriailcoccia.com.au)

**CHEF** Nicola Coccia

#### OPENING HOURS

Lunch Sat-Sun;  
Dinner Thu-Sat

**PRICE GUIDE** \$\$\$

#### BOOKINGS

Essential.

#### VERDICT

Straight fire.



chefs – more patience, more precision – but these guys are up to the challenge. They know exactly how long to smoke the butter that accompanies the house-made sourdough in hay, so that it soaks up ferocious, campfire-like intensity. They understand that it doesn't take much to turn a good snack into a memorable one: just singe the surface of a brioche soldier so that the mushroom pâté, prosciutto and grated pecorino on top all taste like heightened versions of themselves.

Before opening (and closing) Bowral favourite Bistro Officina, Coccia clocked flying hours around Sydney at Otto, Ormeeggio and Quay. While the food here is decidedly more rustic, it doesn't come without its share of edible flowers, ingredients like pumpkin kombucha, and chocolate petits fours disguised as charcoal briquettes frozen in liquid nitrogen. A bit whiz-bang, sure, but you get the sense that nothing is being done for double taps.

What really gives this place life is an earnest, intuitive warmth seldom felt outside of owner-operated restaurants. That's due in large part to Coccia's wife, Alexandra, who oversees the cream-and-terracotta-tinted dining room with gusto. Sommelier Luca Scuri also does his bit, wearing his knowledge lightly when offering suggestions from the fairly priced, mostly Italian list.

As you move through six courses, you realise that everyone here, both on the pans and on the floor, is invested in making the experience as good as it can be. They're always thinking about someone. And that someone is you. ●

# OSTERIA IL COCCIA

An Italian-accented tasting menu licked by open flames sets a high standard for finer dining on the Central Coast, writes **MATTY HIRSCH**.

There's a telling quote in *Farm to Flame*, the 2018 cookbook by Osteria Il Coccia's chef and co-owner, Nicola Coccia. "When you cook, you should always be thinking of someone," it says, "otherwise you're just preparing a meal."

Il Coccia is far more than a humble osteria interested in just preparing meals. It is a 50-seat dégustation restaurant that's also home to one of the few kitchens in the country fuelled exclusively by wood fire. The sort of spot you might find in the inner Sydney backstreets rather than the ground floor of an incongruously modern apartment complex on Ettalong Beach.

If you're lucky enough to sit up at the kitchen counter to witness him in

action, Coccia will make it clear just how much he thinks about people. His grandfather – a fisherman from Puglia – is the inspiration for draping pounded raw yellowfin tuna over burrata sitting in a jarringly sweet green-tomato jam. A salty splash of colatura di alici ties all the flavours together in a thrilling way.

As he passes you a plate of nimbly char-grilled quail, he'll tell you that he grew up hunting with his father outside of Naples. That's why there's long-simmered cacciatore sauce on top, which proves to be a righteous foil for the bitter twice-cooked frisée, sultanas and fermented black garlic underneath the bird.

Cooking with embers and open flames places greater demands on





# STAR OF GREECE

After more than a decade, this destination seaside restaurant has had a facelift, writes **KATIE SPAIN**.

**Y**ou can't help but feel relaxed when there's a game of beach cricket in progress just a stone's throw away from your dining table. As views go, it doesn't get much better than the azure Fleurieu Peninsula coast visible from clifftop restaurant Star of Greece. And it's a beautiful backdrop for informal dining.

Star of Greece doesn't do silver service, that was never the aim. The goal here is welcoming, simple and fresh, a goal that has informed chef Michael Collins' Med-inspired menu.

Collins, who completed his apprenticeship at the Victory Hotel, worked his way up from sous chef to joint head chef at Star of Greece, before taking the top job in 2022. After more than 15 years of experience in the region his connection to local producers and produce permeates the menu.

It's the kind of food that matches the excellent people-watching as

voracious McLaren Vale winemakers share the space with locals and the odd celebrity.

Dress up, dress down; anything goes and that's the way co-owners Doug and Nikki Govan like it. When she's not dazzling diners, Nikki is chair of the Adelaide Economic Development Agency and seems to know everyone in South Australia who walks through the door. Meanwhile, Doug runs nearby Victory Hotel, which is home to one of the most revered wine cellars in the state. For three decades, his global wine list has attracted local winemakers with adventurous palates, a legacy that continues here.

Kick things off with Champagne (from Pol Roger Brut Réserve to Billecart-Salmon Blanc de Blancs) while dipping bread baked by local legend Andy Clappis in McLaren Vale's Romley Estate olive oil. Salt and pepper Kangaroo Island squid is a must, either as a starter or a with a Sichuan pepper

kick as a main, while Kangaroo Island King George whiting is also a staple. Seafood is an obvious choice when the source is so visible but char-grilled wagyu eye fillet is also popular, while a menu devoted to vegan dishes explores a rainbow of local produce. Then there's a small but beautiful dessert menu (amaretto and almond cake with yuzu sorbet is a nod to Willunga's almond-growing history), cocktails (try the Margarita with optional fresh chilli), and a selection of cheeses.

It's a convivial offering but where's the saganaki? The lamb? Isn't this a Greek restaurant? First-timers are forgiven for assuming so but the venue was, in fact, named after a ship that sank nearby in 1888. What was once a seaman's cottage has changed over the years. A recent revamp added an extended deck, a new indoor dining space and bar seating. It's slick but stays true to the laid-back kiosk vibes for which Star of Greece has long been known. This front-row seat at Mother Nature's seaside spectacle – along with the easy, breezy yet compelling menu – are strong reasons to visit (or revisit) this seaside starlet, where a lunch date is as good as a holiday. ●











THE NEWCOMER  
South  
Yarra,  
Vic



QUICK LOOK

605 Chapel St,  
South Yarra, Vic  
[yugendining.com.au](http://yugendining.com.au)

**CHEFS** Stephen Nairn,  
Alex Yu & Justin Edwards

**OPENING HOURS**  
Dinner Wed-Sun

**PRICE GUIDE** \$\$\$

**BOOKINGS**  
Recommended.

**VERDICT**  
A glamorous good time.

Clockwise from left: Yügen's interiors; head chef Alex Yu; smoked eel chawanmushi with brown butter and crisp chicken skin crumble. Opposite: snacks at Yügen.



# YÜGEN DINING

It's time to live large at this glitzy multi-faceted restaurant, writes **MICHAEL HARDEN**.

There's nothing subtle about Yügen nor is there meant to be. From the moment a meticulously groomed greeter ushers you into a glass-walled elevator that drops into the high-ceilinged, stone-walled, dramatically lit basement – a cross between a Bond villain's lair, MONA-style art gallery and Eurotrash nightclub – there's no avoiding the ambition. Perhaps it's the DJ. Or the birdcage-like "private" room suspended over the main dining area. Or the menu stacked with 9-score wagyu, Southern Rock lobster and top-grade sashimi.

It's deliberately, luxuriously over the top, saved from toppling into parody by some key points: a genuine sense of fun, pitch-perfect service and some excellent flavours on a menu that unapologetically cherry picks influences from Japan, China, Malaysia and Vietnam.

Fans of Yügen's sister restaurant – upstairs' Euro-influenced Omnia – won't be surprised about the quality of the cooking. Omnia executive chef Stephen Nairn is in charge here too, assisted by head chef Alex Yu. Terrific balance ensues, even as the flavours get turbocharged.

Take the smoked eel chawanmushi. It's a masterpiece of cuisine-blending, teaming the silkiest of egg custards, shimmering with a robust mushroom dashi, flecked with glorious Skipton smoked eel and finished with satisfying crunch via crisp chicken skin and shallots.

There's raw red snapper combined with translucent shavings of jamón and prettied up with petals; and a cult-worthy mash-up of sesame prawn toast and Chinese donuts served with a sweet-hot chilli amazu sauce. Beautifully tender drunken poussin, served cool and lying in a pool of

Shaoxing wine flavoured with green shiso leaves is another dish to keep you coming back.

That being said, dining in this kind of setting doesn't come cheap, particularly when it comes to drinks. The wine list (that includes a noteworthy four pages of top-notch sake) is full of heavy-hitters from the new and old world that can have you forking out \$1800 for Champagne and \$200-plus for Mornington Peninsula chardonnay. Few bottles are under \$100 and some, for that special occasion, go as high as \$35,000.

Still, Yügen is hardly pretending to be a venue for a quick cheap dinner. The presence of a \$285-a-pop omakase menu, served by Alex Yu at a six-seat bar on Yügen's mezzanine level underlines that. So be prepared to give the credit card a thump. But also, enjoy the fact there's nothing else like it in town, the experience a unique thrill. Personally, I'd return for that chawanmushi alone. ●