

FORK IN THE ROAD



The pavlova at Bennelong in the Sydney Opera House is modeled after the building, with sails made of meringue.



A flat white at Meet Gerard. The coffee drink is a mix of espresso and milk, but different from a latte or cappuccino.



Pad thai is one of the delicious dishes on the menu at David Thompson's Long Chim, which has several outposts.



Bennelong is an upmarket restaurant from Sydney celebrity chef Peter Gilmore. Australia's two biggest cities have a wealth of great eating experiences.

Digging in Down Under

Sydney, Melbourne restaurants offer up big flavors

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEVE DOLINSKY
Chicago Tribune

SYDNEY — When locals tell you to plan a few extra days in Australia, it isn't necessarily because it's a long haul, although my 17-hour flight from Dallas to Sydney did leave me jet-lagged for a solid two days.

They tell you this because they know full well that after spending a few days among the friendliest people in the world, chain-sipping flat whites (a silky espresso-and-milk drink), devouring world-class seafood and exotic produce, you're going to regret you booked that return ticket so soon. I know I did.

The only reason I found myself Down Under in the first place was for work. As one of the 26 regional chairmen overseeing voting for the annual list of *The World's 50 Best Restaurants* — a 15-year-old program started by London's *Restaurant Magazine* — I'm required to attend the annual awards ceremony, held earlier this year in Melbourne. I also have two nieces and a sister-in-law there, so I combined work with a little family time. My plan was to do four days in Sydney, three in Melbourne.

There were far more delicious experiences than I have room here to recount, so I'll stick to the highlights.

Breakfast in Australia is like Sunday brunch in America: a time to catch up with friends over occasionally indulgent food. Unlike the U.S. experience, however, time is more fluid, and people simply have more disposable income (minimum wage is about \$14 U.S.). Few people seem to be in a rush to get to work.

At Meet Gerard in Sydney's laid-back Alexandria

neighborhood, a Wednesday morning at 10 a.m. means a handmade sign-in sheet with 10 names ahead of you. Dudes in man buns eat "brekkie bowls" stuffed with lentils, wilted greens, halloumi cheese and avocados on the sidewalk patio, while young women in cut-offs and flip-flops sip cold-pressed juices, waiting for the privilege of paying \$15 for avocado toast (a proud Sydney creation) with pickled chiles, salty feta, fresh cilantro and yuzu-scented sesame. The food is as delicious as it looks. I over-order, as usual, and walk all the way back to my hotel, thinking of where my next meal will be.

In suburban Woollahra, on a charming block full of furniture shops and cafes, a carnivore's fantasy awaits. Since 1876, Victor Churchill has been displaying dry-aged meat as if it were the couture section at Bloomingdale's. It's not only Australia's oldest butcher shop, but also very likely the world's most elegant. A glass-walled partition showcases the apron-clad butchers, like trophies in a display case, as they break down entire rib racks. Dozens of gorgeous rillettes and charcuterie wait to be picked up for a picnic or party. Without a doubt, these butchers are rock stars.

For dinner, I meet a friend at ester, a boisterous restaurant near the recently revitalized Chippendale area. The decor is minimalist wine bar, yet the flavors



A glass partition showcases the apron-clad butchers at Victor Churchill in Woollahra, a suburb of Sydney. Australia's oldest continually run butcher shop, it opened in 1876.

are in-your-face, laced with dashi, burnt fruit and horseradish emulsions. The ubiquitous kingfish is presented both as slabs of raw, oily-rich, unctuous sashimi, speckled with dried nori (seaweed), then later, as a special, in the form of a whole-roasted collar that I literally pick clean like a grizzly meeting its first wild salmon of the season.

The next night, we decamp to Restaurant Hubert, a new eatery in the heart of the central business district. After descending two flights of curved stairs, you enter another world, as if Baz Luhrmann and David Lynch collaborated on a sexy, underground French *boite*. Everyone looks good in this lighting, but all of the attention is on the plates. There's a soft, supple egg suspended in a gelee of bonito (smoked and dried tuna) garnished with trout roe. Large oysters, as clean and pristine as the Brittany coast, trans-

port us to the 6th arrondissement. Meanwhile, the pommes Anna — layers of sliced potatoes suffused with a beurre blanc and lightly fried until crisp — are among the best things I've put in my mouth all year.

The billowing concrete-and-steel sails of the famous opera house are hard to resist. As I ascend the stairs, I notice one of those sails contains Bennelong, an upmarket restaurant from local celebrity chef Peter Gilmore. I'm just here for dessert. First, a modern interpretation of the lamington, the beloved Aussie sponge puck of jam-lined sponge cake, coated in chocolate and rolled in coconut. It's reinterpreted here as a chocolate ganache-coated sponge, set into a bed of frozen coconut ice cream curls. I also try the pavlova — a dessert claimed by both Australian and New Zealand chefs. Typically a vanilla me-

ringue topped with fresh fruit, here, it arrives as an Opera House replica model, with sails made of meringue hiding a molten passion fruit core. Cold-pressed passion fruit juice is gently poured around the outer edge for an additional tropical grace note.

Aussies love their sweets. As soon as I hit the ground in Melbourne (an easy one-hour flight from Sydney) everyone is telling me about Lune Croissanterie. Located in suburban Fitzroy, amid hipster coffee shops and some nondescript industrial buildings, this airy, light-filled bakery and cafe is unlike anything I've seen. The space is soaring — all clean lines and concrete, like a space lab research center. Bakers work behind a giant glass cube, piping, folding and shaping dough on a marble slab that wouldn't be out of place in a Mandarin Oriental bathroom. While their croissant is the workhorse

— its multiple layers are as thin and delicate as rose petals — it's their other creations, like a twice-baked coconut frangipane with a seam of pandan ganache or a "cruffin" made with lemon curd and citrus sugar, that seem to wind up on everyone's plates.

Two of my most memorable Melbourne meals occur back-to-back. First, at breakfast, inside the mammoth Higher Ground, where cups of flat whites share table real estate with cocktails. You won't find an omelet with a side of bacon or sausage; rather, spiced heirloom cauliflower with curry leaves, or minced lamb with miso eggplant and smoked yogurt. Even the small plates are remarkable. The whey-pickled cucumber salad with tiny, caviar-sized finger limes, in a smoked bottarga (salted, cured fish roe) vinaigrette with edible flowers is a side dish that would never appear on a brunch menu in America. It speaks volumes about Aussie creativity.

At lunch that day, at one of David Thompson's Long Chim branches, Thai street food is slightly gussied up for an urban clientele craving the fiery, funky, salty and sweet grace notes from a cuisine that's typically mangled in America. Here, fish sauce, lime juice and tamarind are synchronized to delicious effect.

It's easy to see why Melbourne gets shunted aside next to its more glamorous, opera house-and-harbor-ringed sibling. I'll take its narrow alleys, English-style arcades and ethnic diversity over the more Instagrammed Sydney any day. But I know I'll eat well in both.

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