

It's not just hops and barley that they're experimenting with, now it's spices, too.



Salt of the earth

Restaurant **LOAM** / Where **Drysdale, Vic** / Review **John Lethlean**

PICTURE THIS. YOU'RE AT A RESTAURANT, on an olive grove, with Port Phillip Heads in sight. It's a pleasant place to be: undulating rural landscape, a whiff of the sea and a scent of eucalypt with crushed olives.

Out comes your first "course", although you don't know what it's called until given a degustation menu at the end of the whole experience (this restaurant revels in the mystery dance).

The course is in two parts. One is a deep white bowl with a "granita" of clarified mussel broth dotted with tiny coriander flowers. It comes with a jug of chilled tomato consommé the colour of chardonnay, which is added to the ice. And it's molluscy, fruity, herbal ... a totally new food experience, and utterly brilliant.

The other part is a piece of chilled black slate, finely beaded with moisture, functioning as a plate onto which a scattering of coffee "soil" – grinds of dehydrated matter the texture of wet sand with caramel/coffee notes and a faintly salty finish – have been spread. They go with a whole French breakfast radish.

Add exceptional Zeally Bay organic sourdough from nearby Torquay, whipped Warrnambool butter and a very excellent glass of Lethbridge Vin Gris, a white made with pinot noir grapes nearby. And limber up. Because the Australian regional restaurant bar just got lifted.

Aaron Turner, the chef and co-proprietor of Loam, is a post foam/gel kinda modern kitchen man. His food is textural, intricate, rooted to the soil, garden and region, yet hugely innovative. It is also something much of the post-molecular isn't: really delicious.

Another pinot (By Farr Saignee), another course. Golden, caramelised chicken stock nurtures zucchini flowers steamed with a sand crab filling and a warm nori mayonnaise, with large tapioca pearls, sea lettuce and a disc of compressed cucumber adding texture. The intensity and balance of the flavours is quite remarkable.

Next, local snapper – cooked sous vide, then panfried – is served with cauliflower variations:

a sublime puree smoked over Loam's own olive pits; a crunchy, toasted "couscous"; and beer-pickled florets, with pickled shallot wafers, daikon "noodle" (a long, meandering strand) and tiny, violet-coloured, savoury flowers.

It's a "wow" moment. It's a "how long has this been going on?" moment.

Next, springy, moist and delicious suckling pig – although with rather too much fat beneath the crisp shell for me – comes with arcs of pan-seared cantaloupe, tangy Drysdale goat's yoghurt and a sprinkling of dehydrated wild fennel pollen, providing an agreeable anise accent. They're unusual combinations, but they're not wacky.

Another small dish sees the reprise of that golden chicken stock around a piece of ruby-coloured beef tongue with a sweet/salty roast garlic puree, quinoa and wafers of jicama, like a soft radish: another impressive salvo.

And then Turner channels Noma's René Redzepi for his final act: thick slices of superb squab breast with tart, warm rhubarb beneath a ghost-like sheath of milk skin, providing not only a textural surprise but also a sweet, malty flavour. Dark, dehydrated saltbush dust is sprinkled over the plate and the garnish includes local wakame, samphire and tetragonia, or Warrigal greens: sea, sky and pastures, all in one.

Dessert is another textural circus of fresh sugar-frosted berries on a bed of pine-infused goat's yoghurt, crunchy nuggets of honeycomb and dissolving bergs of vinegar meringue, all garnished with fronds of wild fennel.

Turner's food has remarkable maturity, adventure with intelligence and technique with curiosity, although it's clearly not for everyone. With a decent room, clever accessories and charming staff, value is added to the dining experience at every turn. I take a sip of a third local pinot, Provenance 2007, lean back and consider the chutzpah of a chef doing this stuff – so well – out here. It's astonishing.

restaurants@theaustralian.com.au
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LOAM

Address: 650 Andersons Road, Drysdale

Phone: (03) 5251 1101

Web: www.loamrestaurant.blogspot.com

Hours: Lunch Thu-Sun; Dinner Fri-Sat

Typical prices: Two courses \$35; four \$60; seven \$90

Summary: Raising the bar for regional Australia

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