



Food that makes itself

Award-winning restaurant Cutler & Co combines exceptional food with design flair and an accessibility uncommon in establishments of its calibre.

You would expect the winner of *Australian Gourmet Traveller's* Restaurant of the Year for 2011 to be an exclusive place; an establishment in which one experiences the best possible food imaginable while enjoying personal service and soaking up the rarefied atmosphere that comes with traditional fine dining.

But Cutler & Co, in Melbourne's vibrant suburb of Fitzroy, was in fact created with inclusivity – not exclusivity – in mind. Head Chef Andrew McConnell and architect Pascale Gomes-McNabb, the high-achieving couple behind this superb restaurant experience, have always envisaged Cutler & Co as being more casual than your traditional fine-dining

establishment. "We wanted a place where people can have a special experience, but also a bit of fun," Andrew explains.

The inclusion of a bar within the restaurant was the primary means of achieving this ambition. A paring back of the traditional refinements, such as replacing table linen with bare oak tables, was another. They wanted the restaurant to be a part of the street – woven into the tapestry of Fitzroy. Including a bar, they theorised, would enable people to walk in for a drink or dessert without having to commit to a full meal.

This is not to say that Cutler & Co is in any way ordinary. "I like a bit of theatre and drama with



1. A thoroughly modern interior that is also open, warm and inviting 2. Ultimately, it's all about the food 3. The ambience at Cutler & Co is spot-on

restaurants," says Pascale, who designed the venue's fit-out. "Fine dining, I think, is meant to be a little like theatre. It's about coming out of the ordinary to experience something special."

Previously a metal factory, the original space had a unique ambience of its own that the duo decided to retain. "We wanted to keep the essence and rawness of the factory and insert a restaurant landscape," says Pascale.

The result consists of a front bar, a main dining room and a smaller, more intimate dining area. The original factory wall and loading bay door remain, and the space is furnished with luxurious banquette seating, mirrored dining booths, gauzy curtains and a pebble garden bed. Extravagant light shades and an ornamental forest punched into an arching metal canopy over the bar complete the design.

Combined with the buzz from the bar, the result is a fine-dining experience that's both comfortable and elegant.

More than a meal
As Andrew sees things, fine dining is about more than just exceptional food. "It is a matter of creating a homogenous environment. The food has to be correct, delicious and well

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prepared; the ambience of interest but not dominating, while also being comfortable and hospitable; and the way the staff handle themselves is a very important element. All these things have to be right."

But while fine dining is about the whole package, food is of course the key. And whether dining on the sous vide-cooked hapuka or much-celebrated wood-grilled quail with foie gras parfait, Andrew's culinary creations leave an indelible impression.

The food's exceptional quality can, of course, be attributed to the breadth of Andrew's experience. Andrew was an apprentice under four leading Melbourne chefs: Walter Bourke, Bill Marchetti, Greg Malouf and Michelle Garnaut (with whom he worked in Hong Kong and Shanghai). Cutler & Co is also the fifth restaurant he has opened with Pascale. Clearly, the man knows what he is doing.

The real secret of Cutler & Co's success is perhaps something less easily defined. Far from feeling any pressure after receiving the

high praise of *Australian Gourmet Traveller's* restaurant of the year and numerous other accolades (including *The Age Good Food Guide's* chef of the year in 2007 and 2010), Andrew is thankful, but seemingly unaffected.

"I suppose for me that drive comes from the simple fact that I really enjoy cooking. I don't do it for awards." When asked to define the essential requirements of making good food, Andrew's answer is simple: "The biggest thing is sourcing the produce. Having an understanding of our produce is also important and then cooking it with extreme care." As for his tips on food presentation: "Handle it with care and use the inherent quality of the food. Do this and it is going to look beautiful anyway."

For Andrew, food creation has seemingly become a pure and essentially humble art form. It's less about imposing his will and more about surrendering to the inherent qualities of the food, which, through respect and absolute care, he lovingly combines and enhances, allowing them to shine.