

DEGUSTATION



Rich and rare



Fancy a decent steak? Melbourne has plenty of them, so long as you know where to look, writes **John Lethlean.**

MEAT IS A BIT LIKE FISH IN this town. And before you piscatorians or aquatarians or whatever vegetarians who bend the rules just enough to consume dead animals from the sea can raise an eyebrow, let me explain.

Despite an almost universal interest in going out to eat steak and seafood, specialist restaurants would be the last places I'd head for either of those particular animal proteins. If, for argument's sake, I woke up tomorrow morning with nothing but the thought of a great steak on my mind (which is unlikely because tomorrow will be Sunday and I wake up with other things on my mind Sundays, such as yum cha) the last place I'd head would be a "steak restaurant".

It's the same with seafood.

The great seafood restaurants of Melbourne are, frankly, anything but great. Monster, gaudy emporia of seen-it-all-before-all-you-can-eat pre-frozen

cheldom, if we're being honest. A menu with various "seafood platters" is a sure-fire sign you are about to have your wallet gouged.

They exist in Melbourne, these so-called "seafood restaurants", tending towards either

(1) the kind of places where whole prawns dance above the plate on bamboo skewers, straddling hurdles of mixed lettuce and dodgy orange-coloured sauce in equestrian fashion (frankly, I'd rather eat a horse); or
(2) franchise-like international hotel-slick joints that masquerade as modern restaurants by smothering everything in sweet chilli sauce and sprigs of coriander. They thrive on the sale of wine and beer at inflated prices.

I can't tell you how many times someone has emailed or called for a recommendation on a "seafood restaurant" (\$3 for the first 30 seconds) only to get a big fat silence. In Melbourne, you mean?

Oh, I can tell them where to go, but

does good things with all manner of the Lord's fauna and flora. The problem is that not many really good chefs in Melbourne tend to concentrate solely on one thing.

Without wishing to appear guilty of harbour envy, maybe if we had one we'd have something like a Pier, for example, which is a crack Sydney restaurant that happens to specialise in seafood. But then the chef-owner would probably have a great restaurant if he specialised in lamb mince.

You'll still get your wallet gouged, because great seafood is expensive, but you won't resent the experience.

And it's the same with steak.

Restaurants that specialise in the stuff tend to fall into similar brackets to those that specialise in seafood. Those where the mind-set is mired in the '70s, and the modern versions that look like international franchises (and several of them are).

Vlado's, in Richmond, is the most famous of the former batch, the Slavic charcoal grill steakhouses. I was stupid enough to take a date there in 1979, a romantic four-course meal of liver, cevapcici (skinless sausages), steak, coleslaw and crepes. No wonder that one went nowhere, and I've never been back.

Of the latter bunch, you've got places such as The Meat & Wine

can do a bit better.

Just to establish where my biases lie, I reckon a steak should have a thin, slightly chippy crust; the meat should offer resistance, which is why I'd always order porterhouse (or striploin), rib cutlet or maybe rump over fillet (tenderloin). The juice inside the piece of meat should be abundant and have oodles of flavour, but it should end up in your mouth, not on the plate (that's in the cooking). As a rule, grass-fed, dry-aged meat (which means the carcasses or parts thereof have been hung in a coolroom to age, not butchered and aged in plastic bags) is best.

My top five steaks in Melbourne (in alphabetical order):

The Botanical's 500 gram dry-aged, grass-fed Gippsland Black Angus rib eye (rib cutlet) served with an assertive, right-up-your-nose celeriac and mustard remoulade (like a shredded vegetable salad with a mayonnaise-based dressing), bone marrow and parsley salad. Great meat, very well cooked and gamished, but all the Bot's steaks are pretty special.

Comme Kitchen's char-grilled John Dee brand 300 gram porterhouse (striploin), a boneless, grass-fed steak — served partially thick-sliced with a splash of sauce bordelaise (red wine and bone marrow) and a herby Montpelier butter on top. A great, firm steak full of flavour.

Lamaro's 400 gram dry-aged grain-fed rib eye (rib cutlet) served with salsa verde, a mushy celeriac remoulade and a herb salad. At less than \$30, fantastic value for money.

Oyster's 280 gram Enviroment porterhouse (striploin) from grass-fed animals (from several breeds) off environmentally certified farms in south and east Gippsland. Rendina's, the supplier, is one of the few organic and environmentally focused butchers in Melbourne; these carcasses are dry-aged for six weeks, with excellent results.

The Point's 250 gram grass-fed porterhouse with The Point garnish (wilted spinach, roasted bone marrow, a selection of mustards and a choice of bearnaise, salsa verde or red wine sauce). The Point is owned by a big meat processor, so it stands to reason they get their hands on good meat, in this case grass-fed animals from either Longford in Tasmania or King Island: Angus, Hereford or Derbyshire breeds. The meat has a strong flavour: not for