



GRILLED OCTOPUS AND KIPFLER POTATO



SYDNEY REVIEW



BELIEVE THE BULL Bodega's interiors command attention. Above left: pumpkin and squash tortilla with goat's cheese; left: crema Catalana with grilled fruit.

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# Rocking the tapa

A couple of Surry Hills young guns have reinvented the tapas bar on their own terms, teaming equal parts authenticity and audacity for a very cool result.

I have no idea what the bull's name is, but I like the way he thinks. 'VIVIR PARA COMER DENADA', he says in a large, passingly psychedelic speech bubble, or 'LIVE TO EAT', while the three metres or so of his mighty chest are emblazoned with slogans equating a full belly with a contented heart. He's the centrepiece of a striking mural occupying one wall of tapas restaurant Bodega, designed by Stanmore's Ink Project. Bodega's fit-out isn't penny-pinching, but there's something pleasing about the way they've taken an inconspicuous space on a Surry Hills side-street and brought it to life, leaning more on creative smarts and innate style than Scandinavian furniture and Italian design. Beyond the bull, the room is all exposed brick, stainless steel and industrial lamps. Floor-to-ceiling glass fills the space with sun by day and affords an excellent view of the Manchester Madness warehouse across the road.

Energy is the thing here. Where some tapas operations conjure impressions of shady, sleepy afternoons surrounded by cigar smoke-wreathed codgers or stumble because of lazy menu writing, Bodega crackles with light and life. Despite the fact that chefs Elvis Abrahamowicz and Ben Milgate's dress and tattoos (if you look closely you can see the menu finely inked down →

Milgate's inner arm in Aztec) mark them out as being very much contemporaneous with the crowd of cool young spunks already frequenting the bar, the boys have been around the block, culinarily speaking. Abrahamowicz spent time at Restaurant VII and Aria, as well as the Four in Hand, where he met Milgate, who previously cooked at Bistro Lulu. Between them they've devised a menu that marries substantial flair and youthful dynamism with a strong insight into the flavours and textures that make Spanish food (and the food of Spain's one-time colonial concerns) rock, surfing the wave of interest in tapas and other things en Español that's building around the country.

The tapas are listed in price brackets that vaguely correspond to the size of the offering – six bucks for marinated olives or eggplant 'en escabeche', \$8 for white anchovies, coppa or corn empanadas, \$10 for a plate of jamón, chorizo 'a la cidra', and so on up to beef short ribs at \$24 a serve. The pluses and the pitfalls are as with other Australian tapas and small-plate operations – the prices don't necessarily reflect the size of what you get nor, it sometimes seems, their value. And many diners – well, okay, me – are still afflicted by a gap in their logic whereby they can't help but expect six small plates to cost less than three larger ones.

The smart way to tackle things, of course, is to follow a sort of Spanish harm-minimisation approach, taking a bit at a time, seeing how you go and ingesting more as the moment demands. The straighter dishes are done with care, but it's where the boys have kicked things up a notch that things get interesting. They say they get their morcilla, that sumptuous Spanish blood sausage, from Abrahamowicz's dad (who, incidentally, does the odd shift on the dishes), but I suspect they're leading us down the garden path; whatever, it's damned fine snag, little rounds of it topped with a julienne of apple and radish. It sits very nicely with 'pan con tomate', the trad grilled bread rubbed with the cut side of a ripe tomato, here topped with marinated fresh sardines and golden shallot, making for a bite-perfect combination of fish-squish and crunch, the flavours true and bright.

Amid Sydney restaurants' recent mania for squid and cuttlefish dishes, octopus has become the wallflower of the cephalopod family, either marched through a tiresome parade of salads or left on the shelf entirely. At Bodega it finds a sexy new lease on life, braised tender then grilled to crisp up the outside, the tentacles draped over kipfler potatoes with a little mayo, parsley, paprika and dill. →

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STEAMED PORK BELLY WITH ROASTED BANANA CAPSICUM

Not only is it a textural marvel, it also goes down beautifully with a (Spanish) beer. Or a cider. There's lots of Spain (and a little South America) in the drinks list, including Cabreiroá, a Spanish mineral water. It's a bit of a grab-bag; there's not much over \$50, but few bargains either, so we may stick to the sherry and cider for a while yet.

Both, it must be said, pair beautifully with the steamed pork belly with a foil of banana capsicum, an intensely savoury, lip-licker of a dish that makes as strong a case for the defence of sweet red peppers as I've seen this year. Oxtail 'Pamplona', so named for its tendency to chase the hapless diner down the street before goring them mercilessly (no, really) sits plain-jane on the plate, two monster-hunks of braised tail trimmed of fat in only the most minimal of ways. Beef short ribs are presented in a similar fashion; they've got flavour for days, with chimichurri to boot, but they're also rather chewier than you'd expect of a dish of this nature, and you might find yourself looking around for more for your \$24. For me, dishes like this would work better if the menu offered something along the lines of the simple salad or bowl of chickpeas you'd see in a Spanish restaurant as a side dish, which you could use to turn a snack into a meal.

Slow-cooked lamb is much more like it, even if it is a more trad-style main course arrangement. They do it sous-vide, I believe, and the flavour is tremendous. The downside of cooking things in a bag is that they don't get browned, so some veal sweetbreads, quickly fried, join the meat on the plate alongside eggplant and pine-nut purée and heavenly braised chicory. On a lighter note, piquillo peppers stuffed with salt cod are god's gift to bar snacks, and the juicy pumpkin-and-squash tortilla balances the sweetness of those vegetables with goat's cheese and a line of black olive purée. Sharp stuff.

Sharper still are the desserts. Here, tradition goes out the window almost entirely. The affogato transpires as a tumbler

**BODEGA**  
216 Commonwealth St, Surry Hills, NSW, (02) 9212 7766.  
Mon-Fri noon-10pm, Sat 5pm-10pm.  
Licensed. Major cards accepted.  
**Prices** Tapas \$6-\$24.  
**Noise** Considerable; opt for lunch or an outside table.  
**Vegetarian** Five dishes and an accommodating kitchen.  
**Wheelchair access** Yes.  
**Plus** It's rock 'n' roll tapas!  
**Minus** So bring your earplugs.

SYDNEY RESTAURANT NEWS

**Blancmange tout** Petersham neighbourhood bistro Manna has given way to Restaurant Blancmange. It's set to join our list of places that don't serve the ingredient for which they're named, but the menu does include a veal, speck and Jerusalem artichoke pie and a creamed rice pudding that we like the sound of. 1 Station St, Petersham, (02) 9568 4644.

**Snake ties RQ**, the mod-Asian diner on Crown Street, Surry Hills, has spawned a cheaper canteen version, Snake Bean, around the corner on Oxford Street, offering the likes of roast duck and chilli pasties and roast eggplant mash with chicken for low, low prices. 95 Oxford St, Darlinghurst, (02) 9380 8808.

**Upstairs, outside** Just when you thought Sopra, the café above Fratelli Fresh, couldn't get any better, it's opened a very Italian courtyard, which you can book for up to 10 diners. You pay a set amount, and then chef Andy Bunn sends out platters of Sopra-esque eats. Other plans for the café include an antipasto display and tasting bar by the entrance. All good. Upstairs, 7 Danks St, Waterloo, (02) 9699 3174.

of milk ice-cream and a long shot-glass each of Pedro Ximénez and espresso. You've gotta love the conceit of serving a dessert almond gazzpacho. It's a scoop of rather excellent corn ice-cream topped by a piece of toffee flecked with almonds and – wait for it – popcorn. There's a little salad of citrus segments, too, and a wedge of orange jelly. Almond milk, served to the side in a little vial, ties it all together (or makes it look like Dalí's breakfast, depending on your perspective). No less exuberant, but perhaps more thoroughly realised, the crema Catalana resembles an un moulded crème brûlée, with a skewer of grilled fruit making for a simple, inspired garnish.

There are lots of really great ideas here, not to mention some clear talent in the kitchen. There are a couple of 'i's to be dotted and 't's to be crossed in terms of the way the menu is constructed, but these things evolve naturally.

I've somehow managed to not mention the service yet, and that's a terrible oversight, because it's very good indeed, particularly in the face of the staggering noise and bustle that can descend on the place of an evening. I'll be damned if the bull – let's call him Ferdinand – didn't have the place sussed from the get-go: for those who live to eat, Bodega offers a hip new route to full stomach, contented heart and vice-versa. \*