

Better than the best

FOOD ROB BROADFIELD



GOING OUT TO LUNCH and dinner for a living is a pretty good job. But it has its pressures. No, seriously. Liver disease. Ennui. Reverse body dysmorphia.

The biggest pressure, though, is the fear of getting it wrong: giving a restaurant Big Love and then discovering — usually via you, you gorgeous reader — that I had experienced a one-in-a-million meal because the restaurant was unalloyed, solid gold crap. This puts one's credibility and authority on the line. No pressure then.

This is the first critical assessment of Vasse Felix since last year's announcement that its head chef Aaron Carr had been awarded *The West Australian* Good Food Guide Chef of the Year. Such

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announcements are controversial: most people can agree on mediocre; no one agrees on the best. What if Vasse had, God forbid, gone downhill? What if becoming WA's Chef of the Year had turned Carr into a chefzilla, a culinary pain in the aspic?

We needn't have worried. Vasse is superb, better than ever, a pure joy. It has improved, even in the six months since it was reviewed (twice, to make sure) for the current edition of the Good Food Guide.

There are lots of reasons why. The dining room has shaken off its rough-hewn interior for something altogether sleeker and modern. It has done so without abandoning its rustic working winery charms: a clever balancing act. There's now a long communal table near the pass for true foodies, a revamped bar, and a downstairs tasting area. The kitchen, too, has had a big-bucks makeover: better tools make good tradies even greater.

The floor crew are among the most polished in the Margaret River wine region. Our waiter answered questions about the intricacies of sous vide, technique and cooking times without pause or flimflam.

The food, too, has grown in stature, leaving behind its Ferran Adria-esque molecular malarkey and steering a truer course of simple, superbly rendered dishes. It remains very much on trend — seeds, nuts, sous vides, pickled this, fermented

that — but if ever a style of cooking suited a restaurant where the sound of tractors is never too far away, it is this.

Carr has a deep regard for the forager chefs of the Scandinavian countries and their simple, austere, approach to ingredients. So, while there may be a multitude of elements on the plate, nothing is over-wrought, out of place or unnecessarily flashy.

The menu descriptions are just nouns separated by commas. If this trend continues chefs will be using emoticons by this time next year.

Blue cheese, apple, celery, walnut rye, \$18, was a subtly constructed cold entree built around the silkier pannacotta scented with gorgonzola and lemon zest, dotted with the kitchen's celery oil and an apple, celery and Cane Cut semillon reduction. The crunch of rye and candied walnuts, blitzed and crumbled, added a slightly sour, dark note to the effervescence of the apple-celery flavours. Brilliant.

Charcuterie, \$28, was served on a piece of timber. A foamy duck parfait was pure essence of buttery liver, perfectly seasoned. Applied to the plank with a cream gun, it was as much air as it was liver but just dense enough to save you the indignity of eating it with a spoon. A small squirt of blackcurrant jelly was the most perfectly calibrated condiment to duck parfait we've ever eaten. A mound of pork and rabbit rillettes was almost creamy but with texture and chew. Butcher Joe Princi makes a superb fatty but light pork and fennel saucisson for Carr, which he ages in the Vasse cellars until rich and salty and semi-firm. A quenelle of sauce gribiche, thinly sliced toasts and house made pickled radish and onions finished the dish.

And on it went. "Pork, cuttlefish, gazpacho, fennel" was a master class in textual shape-changing, with black olive marinated cuttlefish sliced so thin they looked like shaved fennel. \$38. Not cheap.

"White peach, mango, coconut, black sesame", \$16, was built in a stemless wine glass. The highlights? Tapioca pearls plumped and set with peach nectar and the crunch of nitrogen-frozen coconut foam.

One beef: \$6 for two thin slices of baguette-sized bread with butter is not on. Most of us have moved on from the notion that bread should be on the table for no charge — despite it being pretty much standard in the rest of the world — but that's not the way to treat one's customers.

You don't have to be a foodie insider to get Vasse Felix. That, in short, is the utter joy of this restaurant. There are perhaps 20 like it in Australia, where cookery transcends the art and science that bring a dish together in the same way that a master's seemingly random brushstrokes on a canvas can leave you breathless with delight. **W**



PICTURES ROB BROADFIELD



Vasse Felix

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OPEN
seven days for lunch.

PRICES
Entree \$18-\$28
Main \$32-\$39
Dessert \$12-\$16
Sides/Salads \$10-\$12

THE BUZZ:

It just got better. One of WA's top restaurants is now the leader of the pack. Brilliant food that will turn you into a Vasse Felix junkie.

1-9 Don't bother, **10-11** Patchy, **12-13** Good, **14** Recommended, **15-16** Very Good, **17** Memorable, **18-19** Classic, **20** Perfection

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