

the
(sydney)
magazine



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Johanna Griggs
on private pain and
toughing it out on TV

My neighbours, the Murdochs
One road, its famous residents
and a whole lot of scandal

Saving the day
Meet Sydney's bravest people

Plus: Online wine bargains,
an idyllic summer escape
and our longest waiting lists



Balmoral Beach's polite new resident neatly distils everything that's good about dining by the water in summer, writes **Guy Griffin**.

hot

Photography Jennifer Soo

The seahorses and the cuttlefish are back and so are the scuba divers. Teenage boys in boardies are leaping off the recently upgraded jetty, unleashing bombs and belly-flops. Everyone's impressed with the improved water quality in Balmoral Baths. So that's the regrowth of marine life sorted. But the big question is: can newcomer Public Dining Room bring the joy of dining back to the southern end of Balmoral Beach?

It needs to. For many years there was another restaurant on this site overlooking the heritage seawater baths. A self-proclaimed temple of "fusion food", its popularity was a source of childlike wonder to me. After dinner there a few years back - and a voodoo menu that included something called Asian tapas (cream-cheese wontons with garlic and herbs) - I ran screaming from the place, vowing never to return.

Wisely choosing a new name for a new dawn, Balmoral siblings Mark and Monique McLoughlin have spent real money on a sea-breezy glass and maritime-timber makeover by Hecker Phelan Guthrie. Public Dining Room's coastal vibe is effortless thanks to vista windows that take in views of the baths, Middle Harbour and the cliffs that fall down to the green ocean at Clontarf. Kiwi chef Nick Raitt's menu offers pasta, seafood and meat - but mercifully there's nothing remotely resembling Mediterranean yum cha.

The weather's really turning it on today with summer heat and a cloudless blue sky but instead of sitting on the protected deck outside, under the shady Moreton Bay fig, we opt for indoors, where there's air-conditioning and a comfortable banquetta facing the baths.

To start, three native angasi oysters (\$4.50 each) are freshly opened, cut off the muscle and served in their cold liquor. I always feel privileged to be eating these. Then a tasting plate of baby octopus braised with green olives (\$12). Simple, tender, not much oomph. And another small plate that points towards the sea: sweet, fat roasted scallops (\$7 each), sitting among drifts of cauliflower purée, raisins soaked in a sweet sherry vinegar and a scattering of walnuts - much better. It's paired with a salmon-pink 2007 Rimauresq R rosé from Provence (\$16). This is the dining equivalent of light summer reading. And why not?

In the same literary genre, a diverting bowl of linguine, prawn and decent spanner crab, moistened with a shellfish broth (\$29), is seasoned with chili that's more subliminal

suggestion than actual flavour. Next, a fine piece of mullet is carefully cooked, placed on a bed of braised fennel and tomato, and crowned with a sprinkle of deep-fried eschalots and rehydrated olives (\$29). I love the fishy, soupy juices intermingling on the plate in this dish. It's begging to be teamed with a glass of underrated, delicious Balmoral chardonnay from Coonawarra (\$13).

Who doesn't want to see duck on a menu? No one I know in Sydney. At Public Dining Room, aiguillettes of Thirlmere duck breast - always meaty and full of flavour - are cooked to pink and served on a tangle of baby leeks and radicchio tossed with chunks of feta and a few hazelnuts (\$36). It looks like duck, tastes like duck and it's as pretty as a picture.

From our table, we can see investment-banker types in thongs and sandy Mosman mummies in sarongs lining up at the kiosk next door. It's a shame all those parents and their fractious rug rats can't be enjoying Public Dining Room with us today. Hmmm.

My mango tart fine is a beauty, with slices of sweet baked mango on a nicely salty pâté feuilletée and a lovely burnt caramel cream (\$15).

I like the gentle, somewhat polite beachside vibe at Public Dining Room. It neatly distils everything that's good about dining by the water and on the north shore during summer's short chapter. Of course, I want it to succeed in the other months, too. Much will depend on whether "Asian antipasto" returns to the menu. Fingers crossed it won't.



Public Dining Room
2a The Esplanade,
Balmoral.
Phone: 9968 4880.

Licensed.
All major cards.
Open for breakfast
Sat, Sun 8am-10.30am;
lunch daily noon-late;
dinner daily 6pm-late.

Small plates \$8-\$16;
entrées \$19-\$26;
mains \$16-\$46;
desserts \$14-\$15.

Above
Mullet with braised
fennel, tomato and olives.