

## HILL TOP GOODS.

A McLaren Vale winery restaurant has conquered the nation with its perfect blend of food and drink.

Of all the wine regions that surround Adelaide, the McLaren Vale districts are arguably the best served in the restaurant, cellar-door eats and casual, grazing departments.

Many winery venues offer tasting platters while the region can put on a fancy spread in close to 10 well-regarded dining rooms. Of course, cellar-door restaurants offer the greatest experience of the area, with tastings available and menus, when well crafted, hitting a sympathetic spot with the winemakers' own gifts. This sector has become critical enough in the overall hospitality trade that it now earns its own awards.

And late last year at the restaurant and catering industry's national love-in, one of McLaren Vale's quiet achievers was voted Australia's best winery restaurant, beating the best from the more fancied NSW's Hunter Valley and Victoria's Yarra Valley.

To those who have watched the progress of Penny's Hill eatery, known up until late last year as the Red Dot Cafe and now The Kitchen Door, the award perhaps comes with a touch of "I told you so" about it.

For those who might have been a bit surprised by the gong, there's only one way to assess its validity. The kitchen made its name about five years ago with vibrant chef Kane Ellis at the helm, crafting with owner Tony Parkinson a leading-edge menu known as a "morsel selection", now evident elsewhere under titles such as "tastes" and tapas.

With Ben Sommariva in the kitchen now - Ellis has moved to his own Sellicks Beach digs, Saltbush Bistro - the morsels have remained an important part of the restaurant package. It's presented as a five-course shared tasting experience at \$47 a person with a ridiculously cheap \$10 extra for five reasonable pours of matched wines.

The wines are selected by restaurant manager James Spreadbury after exhaustive tastings and benchmarkings of dishes with every Penny's Hill and Mr Riggs Wines until chef, sommelier, owner and assorted managers define their best combination. The five-course morsel selection is not the only way of proceeding here, as you can go with an a la carte menu of four entrees and four mains using all the morsel dishes plus a couple of extras, as well as a couple of bread and olive appetisers and two side dishes.

The morsels are an attractive way to go, given they are well weighted, conveniently sized, and nicely constructed as a tasting journey and strong culinary platform for several of the producer's wines.

After all, this is a winery and arguably its core showcase is the drinks. Spreadbury does a terrific job in conveyancing both the dishes and the wines - with good knowledge, a comfortable and attentive approach, efficient and personable delivery at the table, and immaculate timing.

His job is made so much easier by the class of the dishes coming from Sommariva's kitchen. Sommariva worked in Port Noarlunga's Bistro Kasbah and Hindley St's Cafe Tempo in its heyday, and also had stints in Enoteca, d'Arry's Verandah and Windy Point kitchens. His winery restaurant menu has plenty to get excited about, especially its bravery in venturing into several spicy dishes that forge memorable partnerships with strong regional grape varieties from the Penny's Hill range.

A tempura Kangaroo Island abalone to begin the five morsels is arguably a thinking person's salt and pepper squid, the shellfish sliced scarily thin, perhaps sacrificing flavour for fried comfort, though wonderfully underpinned by a pile of wakame dressed with sesame oil, wasabi-tinged aioli and a couple of dollops of green coloured wasabi flying fish roe. The jellied texture and mustardy spice gets extra carriage beside a 2007 Mr Riggs Adelaide Hills Riesling, which has a subtle Germanic honeyed edge to it - a significant matching duo.

Two excellent vegetarian dishes follow. A slab of grilled haloumi, fairly neutral in saltiness, prompts its salad of rocket and grilled nectarine and plum to come alive alongside a viognier, marsanne and roussanne blend, the wine voluptuous and captivating in the pairing.

A pumpkin, sage and taleggio pasta rotolo is earthy and herbal, burnt butter and capers holding it to its Italian roots. A rosé with it seems a brave choice at first, though in context succeeds in allowing both the dish and the wine to be themselves.

Now come the main attractions, where Sommariva has found a seam of spice that brings to life excellent produce at their centre while complementing quite full-bodied reds as their planned partners.

Snapper fillet is lightly steamed, topped with a medium spicy chermoula, then lifted on to an Asian-focused broth, with sweet spice and lime, lots of shredded vegetables and a glorious fragrance that entwines with a 2006 grenache as if they were genetically twinned.

The same applies with pieces of confit beef rib, redolent with aromatic curry spices, beautifully gelatinous inside, a light crunch on the surface, sitting on a healthy foundation of stripped vegetable salad. The winery's core shiraz harmonises as if it has rehearsed the part for years.

Desserts sit outside the official morsel menu, and come as a tasting plate or individual serves. An almond ice cream/semi freddo is delicate and perhaps designed to match a unique almond liqueur from the cellar door.

A wine glass of berry trifle is fresh and summery, and a pineapple tarte tatin rich and ripe to finish. A sticky viognier is recommended. The pairing further compounds the evidence that there's something quite special going on here, the menu offering well-conceived dishes, not overly tricked up, with precise delivery and in fine harmony with the wines.

The guidance of lunch in the hands of one of the area's smarter conductors and the overall experience is a credit to the team behind it and the region as a whole.

### THE VERDICT

#### THE BILL

Entrees: \$15.50. Mains: \$20. Desserts: \$10.50.  
Morsels (5 courses): \$47 + \$10 with matched wines.  
Morsels desserts (for 2): \$21.50.  
Vegetarian options: Two good dishes already;  
whole morsel selection available on request.  
BYO (regional/special) available.

#### SUMMARY

In an attractive cellar-door setting, what seems a simple open-plan dining room offers a creative and flexible menu totally in tune with the wines.

**SCORE 16.5/20**



THE KITCHEN DOOR