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Queen St goes all Barossa

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August 17, 2009 11:00pm

Article from: (<http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/>)



GRAPE PLACE: The walls of Bar Barossa's Baron's Corner are lined with an impressive array of choice wines.

THERE'S a whiff of future action at the E'cco Bistro end of town and the news is all good. Word on the street is that Philip Johnson will open a chic little wine bar underneath his culinary home before the year's end and there's also the subterranean Supper Club that seems to be gaining momentum just down the road.

Two weeks ago Bar Barossa, a colourful addition to the wine-centric locale, opened. As the name suggests it is a restaurant, bar and wine emporium that specialises in all things Barossa.

The wine list is a 60-40 mix (Barossa 60 per cent, other regions 40 per cent) so that the cellar is balanced and offers all varietals, some of which are not suited to the chilly South Australian valley.

The kitchen is in the capable hands of chef Jason (JJ) Smith who is no stranger to wine-friendly food after lengthy stints at the now defunct Grape Wine & Food Bar and later at Cru Bar and Luxe across the road.

The menu is designed for both meals and grazing and Barossa produce appears throughout. You'll find a list of just-shucked oysters, Maggie Beer's Pheasant Farm pate with sour dough and a Barossa plate of antipasto on the grazing menu, while things become more substantial on the main menu.

Braised beef cheek ravioli (pictured) is a knockout starter - big, rich, powerful, much like a Barossa shiraz. Lighter choices include a slow-roasted tomato and basil tart with a feta salad dressed in apple vinegar. House-made pasta is silky and soft with plump seafood, salmon pearls and mildly saffron cream wrapped around it.

In a tribute to the '90s, grilled Atlantic salmon sits on celeriac mash with seasonal greens and a sorrel beurre blanc, or you can have your mash imbued with Ballycroft brie under a confit duck leg and Maggie's quince paste.

I had lamb shank pie, which after the beef cheek ravioli was no mean feat. And as hearty and generous as the wines from this region, so are the portions on offer here.

Careme sour cream pastry (made in the Barossa of course) sits below and above the deliciously sticky shank ragout alongside another big dollop of mash topped with a green pea puree. It was robust, sweet-salty and very wintry and the pea puree kept it fresh.

Our Hereford gold eye fillet arrived, the prescribed medium rare, parked next to a dense slice of creamy potato bake made from kumara and potatoes and topped with what looked like Cooper's ale-battered onion rings on steroids. It had a homemade quality to it but sadly no Heart Foundation ticks.

Fries come with aioli, the mixed leaf salad is sprinkled with Prue Henschke's verjus and the braised beans are tossed through with smoky bacon.

The room is light-filled by day and colourfully attractive by night. Tables are crisply set and there's a nook that seats about eight at the back which will be curtained off called the Baron's Corner.

The walls are lined with a pretty impressive array of big bottles - think Methuselahs (6l bottle) of '04 Grange and Henschke Hill of Grace a primat (27l) of '06 Langmeile 1843 Freedom Shiraz and there's a very nicely stocked wine shop adjacent. The wine list is a massive tome sprinkled with little known finds and superstar labels.

Winter is the right time to introduce a product like Bar Barossa and some thought will have to go into a menu that will work when Queensland's extreme weather kicks in, signalling the arrival of humidity and soaring mercury.

Service is in good hands with manager Sandy Godfrey, a South Australian wine maker turned sea-changer. The place is compact and has a warm and inviting feel - it will suit both corporate dining and serious wining as well as a pleasant spot for a spot of pate and glass of something South Australian.

Bar Barossa

Address: 545 Queen St, Brisbane

Tel: 3832 3530

Hours: Tue-Fri 7.30am-late

Liquor Status: licensed

Prices: entrees \$18, mains \$30, desserts \$18, wines \$30-\$80,000.

Owner: Darren Davis

Chef: Jason Smith

Smoking: no

Parking: on-street and parking stations nearby

Wheelchair access: yes, full facilities

Other: seats 45, all major credit cards, airconditioned

The score

Food 15

Wine 16

Service 17

Ambience 16

About the score

0-5 don't bother

6-9 needs serious improvement

10 - 12 reasonable, room for improvement

13-14 good

15 - 17 very good, well above average

18-19 exceptional

20 perfection