

# MELBOURNE *by* MENU

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RITA ERLICH



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THE STORY OF MELBOURNE'S  
RESTAURANT REVOLUTION

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## THE AUTHOR

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Rita Erlich is best known for her food writing, which includes cookbooks and restaurants reviews. In addition to restaurants, Erlich's food interests extend to cooking, wine, history, culture, education, agriculture, and nutrition, with occasional forays into maintaining her garden. She was co-editor of *The Age Good Food Guide* for 15 years. She travels extensively, gathering menus as she goes. Her work has appeared in books, journals, newspapers, magazines, and online; her most recent books are *More than French: recipes & stories* with Philippe Mouchel (The Slattery Media Group) and *50 Fabulous Chocolate Cakes* (Penguin).

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*To Alex, with love*



# The 1980s: A Decade of Good Eating, Change and Challenge

This book grew out of a collection of menus, mainly from the 1980s, that I had built up over years of writing about restaurants, and donated to the State Library of Victoria where it is now the Rita Erlich collection in the Australian Manuscripts Collection.

Why the 1980s? There was a practical reason: I wrote my first restaurant review for *The Age* in 1980, the year *The Age Good Food Guide* was first published. I had written restaurant reviews before that, in *The Sun* newspaper, but they were more or less experimental at that stage. All beginnings are more or less arbitrary: 1980 it is.

In 1983, I joined Claude Forell in editing *The Age Good Food Guide*. Whether for the newspaper or for the *Guide* we used to introduce ourselves as reviewers after we had paid the bill, and usually asked for a copy of the menu so we would have a record of the meal in addition to our own notes. Those menus were a useful record, because at a glance I could see how a restaurant's menu and prices had changed over a year or so.

I gave some menus in the early 1980s to the Library of South Australia. The rest stayed with me, growing annually. The stack of menus grew into a pile, the pile grew into two piles, and then divided into boxes, and were loosely stored in large envelopes. In time, there were menus everywhere—in files, in filing cabinets, in stacks on my desk, in envelopes behind my study door, in boxes under the bed. They changed from being records to being a nuisance, but since I didn't

move house I did not have to make a choice about what to do with them. It is just as well that I am not tidy. The clutter of papers and books did not worry me so much that I felt the need to throw it all out.

The nuisance gradually turned into an archive: I realised that the collection was an important record of how we ate, what we drank, and the growth of an industry. The 1980s was a remarkable decade in Melbourne's dining history. Without that decade, more than any other, we would not have the hospitality industry that exists today.

But what to do with all those menus? I was unsure until a chance meeting with Patricia O'Donnell in 2011. As a former member of the Library Board of Victoria, she thought the collection belonged there, and suggested I speak to people at the State Library. I did, and they were pleased to receive the collection. Not only that but an exhibition on food in Victoria called *Gusto! A culinary history of Victoria* was being planned; the curator might welcome some of the menus. I went through menu after menu with curator Tracey Judd Iva, explaining them. "Look at the handwriting!" "So-and-so wrote that menu, you can see his handwriting again here and here." Each menu acquired importance when you knew who wrote it, understood the food choices, knew who cooked what and what happened next. This chef went on to that restaurant, this restaurant was bought by the people who had been... and later became... After a few weeks, she said: "Write a book!" This is it.

The 1980s was a decade of recession and boom. It was the decade before Southgate and Crown Casino. It was the decade of more BYOs than licensed restaurants, and the time the licensing laws changed to allow for bars and cafés to serve alcohol, with or without food. It was the decade when the new wave of restaurateurs and chefs—people like Sigmund Jorgensen, Iain Hewitson, Mietta O'Donnell and Tony Knox, Stephanie Alexander, and Walter and Maria Bourke—hit their stride and turned small unconventional businesses into major enterprises.

It was the decade when the wine industry in Victoria grew from its cautious 1970s renaissance into a statewide success. It was the decade of taxes on wine, supplemented in 1986 by the Fringe Benefits Tax, which ruled that finger food was a deductible expense for a company,

but a meal—and anything involving alcoholic beverages—was entertainment and therefore disallowed as a deduction, even for wine and beer companies.

It was a time of invention, of imagination, of great change and challenge. In that decade, we shifted from French-dominated fine dining to modern Australian with its Asian influences, and we saw the emergence of modern Italian and excellent Chinese and Japanese restaurants.

Technologically speaking, the decade began with telephones and photocopiers and faxes. It ended with personal computers and the earliest mobile phones.

For much of the decade, most menus were handwritten (probably because print costs were high and not enough people knew how to type). We smoked cigarettes, cigars and pipes in restaurants. But not every chef liked it: there are plaintive requests on many of the menus to wait until the end of the meal.

The 1980s was the decade of the fixed-price menu, a useful device for ensuring a minimum spend, although it was always presented as a way of enabling diners to enjoy a complete experience. Some restaurants, more

accommodating and with an eye to the market mid-week, enabled two courses at a fixed price, instead of the three (or more) that were compulsory on Saturday nights. Food choices in the 2010s are now more flexible, although the trend is to whatever-you-want-so-long-as-you-share-it. The fixed-price menu has made a comeback as a formal multi-course degustation (itself an expression of the now scorned *nouvelle cuisine*).

As for what we ate: chilli, ginger and coriander belonged to Asian cooking in the 1980s, not ‘mainstream’. We ate timbales, and sweet and

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savoury bavarois, we enjoyed offal. Butter was still everyone's darling; roulades were everywhere; the sorbet cropped up between entrée and main course; and bread wasn't an extra until the very late 1980s when a smart new St Kilda restaurant called Caffè Maximus started charging extra for bread and vegetables. Tasmanian salmon entered menus in the mid-to-late 1980s, as the industry was established. Salmon and grain-fed beef were gourmet news, as were avocados. So was the daiquiri, the then fashionable cocktail that cropped up sometimes in dessert form, as in a banana daiquiri parfait, which was, as I recall, a bit like that quip about Wagner's music, "better than it sounds".

There were no Melbourne celebrity chefs in the 1980s, no one who made their name in television, or by endorsements. It was during the 1980s that chefs started to write books—a trend that has continued. You could fill a good-sized bookshelf with the volumes produced by the people represented here. There was no internet, and no blogging, no Facebook, no Twitter, no apps.

To some extent, what was happening in Melbourne during the 1980s reflected what was happening overseas. Restaurateurs and chefs went to France and Italy and Hong Kong, seeing and tasting state-of-the-art gastronomy. They bought cookbooks and magazines. The internationalism has been accelerated by faster travel, television series and the internet, food festivals, even more books.

All the chapters in this book (but one, Flower Drum, and the reason is apparent in that chapter) start with a menu from the 1980s. But no one shot a starter gun on January 1, 1980, and no curtain came down on New Year's Day, 1990. So the narrative of each chapter moves backwards as well as forwards to the present day. The aim is not to be nostalgic but to trace how the Melbourne restaurant scene got to where it is.

Publisher Geoff Slattery and I agreed that if there was no menu in my collection, there would be no chapter based on the restaurant and its owners and chefs. If I did not have a menu, I would not write about the restaurant directly. And even when I had the menu, we had to make decisions because of space constrictions. This is not an encyclopedia gastronomica—although there were times it felt like it, because every

## INTRODUCTION

restaurant led me to dozens of people. It was like working on a spider's web; every person I spoke to was like another thread, every person I spoke to caused a reverberation in other parts of the web.

I know very well who is not included and who was important, or who became an important part of the scene. Philippe Mouchel, for example, opened Paul Bocuse restaurant in 1990, which was too late, however important it was, and however important he is to Melbourne dining. Olimpia Bortolotto, as another example, opened Bortolotto's in 1991 (and later Cecconi's Cantina at Crown Casino, and later still Cecconi's in Flinders Lane in the city). Donlevy Fitzpatrick and all his enterprises should have had a chapter, so should Alex Tseng and Bamboo House. Geoff Slattery (as restaurateur) is missing, so is Mick Kadamani, who was known as 'Mr Seafood', Vincent Rosales from Maxim's, and Paul Lynch from Lynch's, Tansy Good and Marc Bouten from Tansy's, as well as Vlado Gregurek of Vlado's, who changed our perceptions of steak. There are no restaurants outside metropolitan Melbourne, yet there were and are some great places in regional Victoria.

But there are so many people here within this book. It's an irregular history because there is no clear beginning or ending, as there is with most histories. This is a record of restaurants, people, meals, wines, conversations past and present. For me, the wonderful thing is that the story is open-ended: some of today's best chefs, waiters and sommeliers began or were trained in the 1980s, or learnt from them, or are learning from them.

What's more, the story of Melbourne dining is still being written, menu by menu.

**RITA ERLICH, JULY 2012**

# Then & Now

*This list offers a glimpse of what was hot in the 1980s,  
and the things we didn't have.*

## What was hot in the 1980s

Orange roughy  
Roulades  
Avocado  
Bavarois (often capsicum)  
Brains with citrus or black butter sauce  
Smoking in restaurants  
Dinner dances  
King Island crayfish—affordable, too  
BYOs  
Grain-fed beef  
Handwritten menus

## What we didn't have in the 1980s

Heirloom vegetables  
Crown Casino  
Southgate  
Rocket (or roquette) salads  
Wagyu beef  
Pinot grigio/pinot gris  
Tapas (or anything else Spanish)  
Slow-cooked pork belly (outside Chinese restaurants)  
Wine bars (other than Jimmy Watson's)  
Foams, soils, and dusts on the plate  
Vegetarian degustation menus  
Gluten-free options  
Internet, websites, Twitter and apps

# My Favourite 1980s Dishes

*Great dishes remain in the imagination and in the palate memory. These are some of the dishes I remember very clearly from the 1980s, and loved.*

## **Walter Bourke's fish quenelles at Maria and Walter's**

A good quenelle is a remarkable thing. Essentially a poached seafood mousse, when it's good, the flavour is in inverse proportion to the delicacy of the texture. Bourke's quenelles were so light, but with big, lingering flavours. Quenelles, made with different fish, popped up from time to time on the menu at Maria and Walter's, and were always great.

## **Rump steak at Vlado's**

Vlado's, which has been a steakhouse on Bridge Road, Richmond, since 1964 (and which is still in operation), has the finest steaks in Melbourne as far as I am concerned. I love good steak, and I'm particularly fond of rump, but am not a big meat eater. At Vlado's, I used to ask restaurateur Vlado Gregurek (who passed away in June 2012 as I was writing this book) if I could have a small piece of rump. He would shake his head at me—as if I had asked for a fish with wings. But I would get what was for him a very small serving, and for me slightly more than I thought I could eat. But I always finished my steak, with pleasure.

## **Tea-smoked duck at Bamboo House**

This dish is still on the menu in the Little Bourke Street restaurant, and it's still wonderful. It's a northern Chinese dish, and the smoked duck, sliced and still tasting richly of duck, comes with soft white buns that are like clouds. There's a related dish served at Andrew McConnell's



Golden Fields restaurant in St Kilda—twice-cooked duck with steamed bread—but it's a distant relation, for me.

## **Stuffed whiting in pastry at Jean Jacques**

This was a signature dish at the original Jean Jacques, in North Melbourne. The whiting was boned and filled with a seafood mousse, wrapped in pastry, and baked. Wonderful flavours, and a great range of textures. With its mixture of fish and pastry, it was a kind of seafood pie, deconstructed and then reformatted.

## **Fish and chips at The Last Aussie Fishcaf**

Good fish and chips are like true love—very rare. I remember the Fishcaf's longingly. The batter was always dry and crisp, the fish always moist and true to flavour, and the chips were always crunchy on the outside and soft inside in a kind of textural echo of the fish. The plates came wrapped in white paper, still so clean and grease-free that the dishes could be unwrapped and then the children could use the paper to draw on.

## **Assorted sorbets and ice creams at Capers**

Capers was a small restaurant in Kew, which opened late in 1985, whose chefs were Gerard Douglas and Ian Buchanan. The cooking was wonderfully imaginative, and they made great use of spices. The dessert I remember was a plate of tiny balls of ice creams and sorbets, all with perfect textures and intense flavours, arranged almost like a stylised bunch of flowers. It looked beautiful, and every mouthful was exciting—such a clever way to finish a meal. The site is now an Indian restaurant called Milan.

## **Quail with cherries at Two Faces**

The dish I remember was not just quail, but wild quail, so intense and gamey in its flavour it was hard to eat—except that there were poached spiced cherries alongside. I'd never understood until then why fruit was served with game, and that dish explained it to me. The sweet spicy juiciness of the fruit cut back the richness of the quail, and made it easy



to eat. I thought there was kitchen magic going on, because there were enough cherries for every mouthful of quail.

### **Quail and polenta at Marchetti's Latin**

It was a big untidy dish, as I recall, there was nothing elegant about its presentation. Two plump roasted quail (I took to asking for one only) on yellow polenta, with its particular combination of soft and slightly gooey textures, and a long-cooked tomato-based sauce that had the added flavours of red wine and onions and herbs.

### **Winter melon soup at Flower Drum and Rickshaw Inn**

It wasn't on the menu either at Flower Drum or Rickshaw Inn (in Exhibition Street), but was included in special banquet menus and was available if you ordered it in advance (as I did once at Flower Drum for a special dinner). Haunting in its flavours, both ethereal and substantial, the melon has a particular smooth texture and absorbs the other flavours in the broth, such as mushrooms, ginger, spring onion and sometimes prawns.

### **Grilled fillet of snapper with lentils and truffles at Tansy's**

Tansy's, in North Carlton, was a small BYO with a seasonally changing menu that was always miraculous in its planning. Tansy Good and her then husband Marc Bouten were the chefs. Pick any entrée, and it would go with any main course, and any dessert. Tansy's moved into the city, where it later became a restaurant called Stella (run by Andrew Blake, Geoff Lindsay and Grant van Every), and is now The European. I remember ordering this particular dish when I was reviewing the restaurant because I thought it wouldn't work. It was a triumph of flavours. It was like eating a piece of music.