

Simon Thomsen selects the hottest new dining rooms in town.

Yes, storm clouds might be gathering over the restaurant industry as everyone worries about whether there's enough money left over to dine out, but it's still full steam ahead for Sydney's most creative chefs, who continue to come up with imaginative ways to convince diners to open their wallets.

The past year's delicious panoply of newcomers includes high fliers such as Universal and Berowra Waters Inn, which rank among the finest, as well as more modest and great-value places such as Mamak, which are equally enjoyable.

And while everything from butter to rice has doubled in price, fierce competition for dining dollars means restaurants have borne most of the costs so far, ensuring that meals remain good value.

The 2009 edition of *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* features 51 new listings, in a sure sign that the city's dining scene continues to thrive. Here are 10 that caught our attention. →

Photography Anson Smart

Eugenio Maiale, chef and owner of A Tavola.



## BEST NEW RESTAURANTS



Berowra Waters Inn

**Berowra Waters Inn**

A legend is reborn. This iconic waterside setting, which gave us Gay and Tony Bilson and Janni Kyritsis, and put modern Australian fine dining on the international map, is back with a vengeance thanks to the dedication of Forty One's Dietmar Sawyere.

After several fallow years, the Glenn Murcutt-designed sandstone, glass and corrugated iron "weekender", nestled among twisting angophoras, has been refreshed thanks to a smart facelift. Pilgrims come by sea (a punt picks you up from a wharf opposite after a 40-minute drive from the city) and air (seaplane from Rose Bay) to savour an ever-changing four-to-six course meal from a menu of more than a dozen dishes.

To start, you might choose a chilled vichyssoise with caviar and oyster beignets, followed by grilled scallops with oxtail, then stuffed pig's trotter and white chocolate panna cotta. Sawyere cooks with a lightly joyous yet elegant touch, as if he too feels freed from the strictures of city life.

Abetted by an impressive international wine list, Berowra Waters Inn is a sublime and swoon-worthy blend of serene bushland setting and polished dining that led to it being named the 2009 Good Food Guide Best New Restaurant. It's no surprise that diners linger on the outdoor balcony in an attempt to prolong the magic of the setting just a little longer.

Via Public Wharf, Berowra Waters.  
Phone: 9456 1027.



**Above**  
Dietmar Sawyere cooks as if he feels freed from the strictures of city life, creating dishes such as crown roast of wild hare, carrot puree and fresh winter truffles from Oberon, NSW, at Berowra Waters Inn.

**Opposite**  
Adam Humphrey takes northern English cooking and gives it French finesse with dishes such as pan-fried barramundi, confit duck, carrot puree and duck gravy at Restaurant Arras.

Restaurant Arras

**Restaurant Arras**

The transformation of Walsh Bay's formerly industrial waterfront into a millionaire's row is almost complete, but we hoi polloi can still enjoy it thanks to a burgeoning number of great nosh spots. Think The Wharf Restaurant, Ottoman Cuisine, the pizzeria Ventuno, and Firefly wine and tapas bar. The newest kid on the drag is a cleverly detailed fine diner with witty English predilections, courtesy of Yorkshire lad Adam Humphrey.

Restaurant Arras was three years coming, but worth the wait. The old wool store's character has been woven into the witty look of this fine diner with its designer touches and Union Jack fabric chairs.

Humphrey, aided by partner Lovaine Allen, gives French elegance to northern English cooking, enjoying the occasional droll joke along the way, such as "rack on black", which is lamb saddle on house-made black pudding with leek tortellini; and "happy goblin", poached mahi mahi with fennel and peas.

For dessert, look no further than the thoroughly modern take on an old-fashioned Yorkshire cream tea: trifle-like layers of scone, clotted cream, strawberry jam and tea jelly. It's a bit of all right.

24 Hickson Road, Walsh Bay.  
Phone: 9252 6285.





### Mamak

Yes, Sydney is world class when it comes to how much money you can spend on a night out, but the bargains are there if you know where to look – in this case, a bustling, no-fuss take on fast food, Malaysian style. No wonder there's a nightly queue being entertained by roti cooks at the front window making wonderful, crisp and flaky flatbreads. They knead, stretch, roll and grill with such mesmerising speed and precision you know exactly what to order first.

This is authentic, street-hawker food, full of bold, spicy flavours, arriving faster than Michael Schumacher for very few ringgit. A basic, irresistible roti canai comes with spicy dhal, and a dollop of jammy sambal. Waif-like chicken satays are perfumed with lemongrass and charcoal smoke. Ayam goreng is deep-fried chicken so perfect the Colonel would weep with envy. A soft lamb curry redolent with clove is slightly sweet, while stir-fried water spinach with chilli and shrimp paste is a funky mix of heat, sweetness and gentle bitterness.

There's a golden cone of crisp, buttery and sweet roti tisu for dessert, or the sugar rush of jellies with condensed milk over shaved ice. All that's missing is a drive-through.

15 Goulburn Street, Haymarket.

Phone: 9211 1668.



**Above** (from left)

Julian Lee, Alan Au and Clement Lee are part of the team at Mamak.

**Opposite**

Matthew Kemp has brought quality bistro dining to the north side, with dishes such as Eton mess.

### Burlington Bar and Dining

It's fair to say the north side isn't particularly blessed with great eating, which makes the arrival of this well-priced bistro a welcome shot in the arm. Chef Matthew Kemp crossed the harbour bringing bold and simple food with English and French panache. It's food that will remind fans of early days at his flagship Randwick two-hatter, Restaurant Balzac.

Kemp gives new vigour to otherwise humble ingredients, such as brawn in a beautiful, smoky terrine with crunchy slivers of crumbed pig's ear. He calls it peasant food, but Burlington offers more. The menu features many dishes in either entree or main sizes, and beef-loving blokes will thrill to a rib eye of bone-on, dry-aged angus in one size only – 1kg. The small, global wine list is similarly pleasing and affordable.

The crisp decor in this long terrace with its rear bar is built on classic bistro traditions. Desserts such as Eton mess with rhubarb and strawberries raise a wry smile in former boarding school residents, who wonder why their fees never bought food this good.

6 Burlington Street, Crows Nest.

Phone: 9439 7888.



## Universal

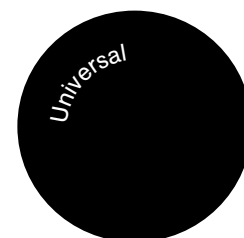
She enjoyed mixed fortunes during her London sojourn, but Christine Manfield's return to Sydney after a seven-year absence has been triumphant. Her new restaurant, Universal, is guaranteed to get your heart beating a little faster. It's a sexy, challenging experience, and proof of what a distinctive and pace-setting restaurateur she is.

Manfield is ringmistress over a constantly changing, intriguing and sensually textured menu. Choose three or four courses from 14 small savoury dishes that build like a long, slow crescendo. It's food that's impossible to categorise, exploring all corners of the globe, from Latin American kingfish ceviche with tomato and chilli salsa to the luxe European sensibility of scallops with truffled foie gras; the Chinese undertones of quail consomme with steamed rabbit, quail and pork pancake; and Indian-inspired venison with spinach pakoras and garam masala-spiced potatoes and peas.

This is exuberant, confident and clever cooking that might be light on carbs but not on your wallet. Wittily named desserts such as "Like a Virgin" (coconut mousse with a mangosteen and coconut lychee sorbet cigar) and "Totally Nuts" (hazelnut chocolate mousse with salted hazelnut caramel) provoke a smile.

Designer Tina Engelen has given the mostly outdoors courtyard space a warm red, yellow and orange glow in tribute to the chef's love of spices, while the wine list and service are polished and knowing. Wow.

Republic 2 Courtyard, Palmer Street, Darlinghurst. Phone: 9331 0709.



**Above**  
Universal's Christine Manfield has made a triumphant return to Sydney with dishes like "totally nuts".



### **Worth it at twice the price.**

The three-course \$85 lunch at Quay.

### **Best up-and-coming chef.**

Daniel Puskas at Oscillate Wildly with his \$95, eight-course degustation.

### **Best value in your Sunday best.**

Middle Eastern tasting plates at Almond Bar, Darlinghurst.

### **Best spot to see and be seen.**

North Bondi Italian Food, especially if you like Speedos.

### **Best place to take visitors.**

Berowra Waters Inn via seaplane.

### **When size doesn't matter.**

Try the tiny Surry Hills enoteca Vini for antipasti and Italian wine.

### **Best reason to wait in a queue.**

Bodega, for sassy, modern tapas in a funky setting.

### **Best place to drink while waiting for a table.**

Foveaux Restaurant & Bar, whether you're heading upstairs or across to Bodega.

### **It's only money.**

King crab two ways at Golden Century. Bring some friends.

### **Best place to take the family.**

Ripples at Chowder Bay, followed by a bushwalk and swim.

### **Dish to eat daily for the rest of your life.**

Truffle ice-cream slice at The Wharf Restaurant.

## Jugemu & Shimbashi

This is two Japanese restaurants for the price of one – an intertwining of hand-made soba noodles with the razzle-dazzle of a teppanyaki grill with separate doors and decors, but no wall in between. No matter which side you sit on, you get the best of both worlds, although the highlight is chef Masahiko Tojo's hand-crafted noodles, which he makes twice daily in the front window of Shimbashi, stone grinding the buckwheat flour as he goes.

His delicate, slippery creations might appear as cha soba – cool green tea noodles to drop in to a warm, smoky dashi broth, or kamo-nan, a sweetly perfumed, glistening duck and dried mackerel broth. It's like the 1985 Japanese-noodle western *Tampopo* come to life.

From the Jugemu side come crisp and opulent wagyu beef gyoza, grilled fish head, or their specialty, okonomiyaki, a sort of bubble-and-squeak covered in squiggles of Japan's Worcestershire-like answer to barbecue sauce. You're spoilt for choice with this superbly crafted, authentic Japanese, underpinned by polite and deferential service and a bargain-priced wine list. Don't be surprised if you end up having twice the fun too.

246 Military Road, Neutral Bay.

Phone: 9904 3011.



## A Tavola

Everyone should have a warm and sultry Italian in his or her life. Both chef Eugenio Maiale and his intimate, model-thin osteria fit the bill nicely, thanks. It's a convivial and nurturing diner with a 10-metre long marble communal table and small menu – two olive spuntini (nibbles), a trio of entrees, and the same number of pastas and salads, supplemented by a blackboard menu mostly inspired by the house-made pasta, some of which hangs like curtains from the kitchen window.

The chef's blend of rustic flair and passionately seductive flavours makes A Tavola (meaning "to the table") irresistible. After dreamy, complimentary rosemary- and chilli-scented focaccia, you might opt for a blissful bowl of sauteed mushrooms and green peas with fragrant mint and salty ricotta.

Maiale is a maestro with pasta, including bucatini amatriciana – tube pasta with guanciale (cured pigs cheeks) – a classic from Abruzzo, the central-eastern Italian region that drives his approach. The small wine list is exclusively Italian. The blackboard desserts might include a wantonly lush panna cotta. If they did takeaway, the first thing you'd order is the chef.

348 Victoria Street, Darlinghurst.

Phone: 9331 7871.



### Above

Eugenio Maiale crafts irresistible flavours at A Tavola, such as pappardelle with braised goat and Sicilian green olives.

### Opposite

Masahiko Tojo makes fresh noodles twice a day at Jugemu & Shimbashi.



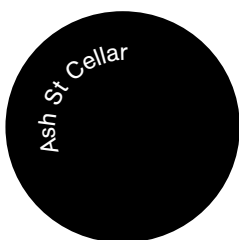
### Ash St Cellar

Hotel wunderkind Justin Hemmes created the closest thing diners and drinkers have to Disneyland with Ivy, an upmarket folly of restaurants and bars complete with a rooftop swimming pool. It boasts a steakhouse called Mad Cow, a sushi train and a fourth-floor Italian, Uccello, beside the pool. It makes the laneway wine bar Ash St Cellar seem like the poor cousin by comparison, but no lesser for it. This predominantly outdoors space with its casual, no-bookings approach has snappy Parisian style.

With Lauren Murdoch's skilled and relaxed hands in the kitchen, it's a pleasant and refined spot to work your way through a smartly global wine list, accompanied by some of the 20 simple tapas-style dishes from a pleasing all-day menu. It's hard to go past the plate of five of the very best cured meats, including jamon Iberico and wagyu bresaola. Mozzarella, weeping its sweet milky juices on baked green tomato, is another winner. Grilled lamb cutlets with braised eggplant are spicy, smoky and irresistibly tender.

Sip, nibble, sip. Soak up the vibe. Laugh. Maybe it's time to try one of the 30-odd champagnes on offer. Look for them under "bubbles".

Ivy, 1 Ash Street, city. Phone: 9240 3000.



#### Above

Chef Lauren Murdoch sends out 20 simple tapas-style dishes at Ash St Cellar.

#### Opposite

Peter Conistis is exploring new flavours at Civic Dining, such as duck confit and quince pie with a salad of poached pear, watercress, radish and wild figs.

### Civic Dining

Peter Conistis rewrote the rules for modern Greek flavours, creating one of Sydney's finest dishes, a moussaka of eggplant, scallops and taramasalata along the way. So it left many in shock when his restaurant, Omega, closed suddenly in late 2006.

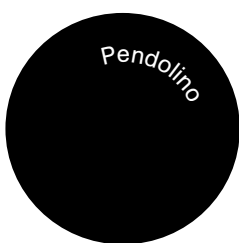
The good news is the resilient chef has returned to the kitchen in this wonderfully restored, sleek art deco hotel. While his mum, Eleni, cooks satisfying and great-value traditional Greek fare for lunch downstairs, Conistis has expanded his repertoire to explore the more exotic and sun-drenched flavours of the Mediterranean. Best of all, the moussaka is back, along with kingfish kibbeh nayah, a lighter take on the Lebanese dish normally made with lamb. The rabbit and black olive pie is resurrected, too, alongside manti, an Asian dumpling given a modern twist with a spanakopita filling.

Yes, the room can be loud, but it's all part of the hubbub of a busy pub. Besides, you can always join them for a drink at the adjacent outdoor terrace. Make mine a Greek Mythos lager thanks.

Civic Hotel, cnr Pitt and Goulburn streets, city.

Phone: 8080 7000.





**Above**  
Nino Zoccali has brought a smart mix of wine bar and l'olioteca to The Strand Arcade.

### **Pendolino**

Italian will always be in fashion, and above the Victorian splendour of The Strand Arcade's designer frock shops is a clever and appealing mix of cafe, wine bar, ristorante and l'olioteca (extra virgin olive oil shop).

Overlooking the arcade is a pocket-sized cafe for casual breakfasts and lunches, while inside the large dining room the venetian blinds are drawn on a softly lit space of exposed brick, dark carpet, timber and leather banquettes, overseen by an impeccable and smartly attired floor team. Pendolino, named after a small olive variety, is chef Nino Zoccali's ode to olive oil. He treats them like wines, designing a menu that showcases

the distinct personalities of the various olive oils – you'll find them cited below each dish – and drizzles them liberally over most courses. His open kitchen serves a passionate, generous and lush combination of modern and traditional Italian fare.

Begin with a tuna carpaccio with a sassy "tonnato" dressing, followed by the intensely creamy pappardelle with marjoram-scented veal ragu. Chargrilled, grass-fed beef sirloin on a malty oxtail and pearl barley risotto is ringed by a golden halo of peppery olive oil.

The only thing missing is olive oil on the desserts, but perhaps Zoccali just isn't telling us. **Shop 100, Level 2, The Strand Arcade, 412-414 George Street, city. Phone: 9231 6117. (s)**

### **NEXT COURSE**

Still hungry? Here are some more fresh arrivals.

#### **Hugos Manly**

It has been a long time coming, but the dashing Evans duo, David and Pete, have crossed the harbour with an Italian-style menu, plus pizza, with a side serve of glamour. Open daily, no bookings on weekends. Shop 1, Manly Wharf, East Esplanade, Manly. Phone: 8116 8555.

#### **Steel**

Restaurant designer Michael McCann and Pony chef Damian Heads have come together to create a brasserie serving wood-grilled steaks and shared plates at a communal table. 60 Carrington Street, city. Phone: 9299 9997.

#### **Sean's Kitchen**

Astral chef Sean Connolly unbuttons his jacket for casual comfort food, seafood and steaks, plus a ham bar. Star City, 80 Pyrmont Street, Pyrmont. Phone: 9657 9264.

#### **The Beresford**

Italian chef Danny Russo, last seen at Lo Studio, tries his hand at a trattoria in this Taylor Square pub. 354 Bourke Street, Darlinghurst. Phone: 9357 1111.

#### **Rockpool Bar & Grill**

Neil Perry's Melbourne steakhouse will be replicated in an art deco setting come January 2009. Expect premium produce and sustainable seafood, or just a wagyu burger in the bar. 66 Hunter Street, city. Phone: 9252 1888 for details.

#### **Spice Temple**

More Perry magic, this time playfully exploring China's key food regions. Opening January 2009. Phone: as above.