



COVER STORY



AND THE WINNER IS ...

After sampling the best – and the rest – of Sydney's fine dining, **Simon Thomsen** and **Joanna Savill** reckon we're a lucky state.

Let's start a fight. Sydney is the best-value fine dining city in the world. Go on, we dare you to say otherwise, especially if you're from Melbourne. To prove our point, just check inside the 2008 edition of *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*. You may not be able to afford Sydney real estate but you don't need a second mortgage or a stockmarket surge to sit at one of its top tables.

Consider the one-hat newcomer Glebe Point Diner. Mains are under \$30 but its old-fashioned, yet contemporary, comfort food is priceless. At Quay, a stellar three-hatter that would challenge the world's best (although most can't match it for harbour views), chef Peter Gilmore serves a spectacular two-course lunch for \$65. Despite the effects of drought and floods on produce prices, it's been a good value year.

You'll find more than 400 restaurants, in Sydney and regional NSW, scored out of 20, plus a selection of Sydney's best bars, cafes and provedores. All up, the 2008 *Guide* features more than 800 places to eat and drink on the state's most comprehensive food traveller's map. As an APEC delegate once said, we've never had it so good.

Last night at the MCA Cafe, by the still and sparkling waters of Circular Quay, the state's best restaurateurs gathered over a glass of Veuve Clicquot, or perhaps a Vittoria espresso to steady the nerves, as those sought-after hats were given out, Tetsuya's once again topping the list as Restaurant of the Year.

We had a great, and by no means easy, time allocating the honours, yet there have been downsides to all the excitement. Not every meal was spectacular, let alone original. Hands up who didn't have cauliflower puree, slow-braised wagyu or yellowfin tuna tataki this year? Complimentary jelly, veloute or foam "amuse", anyone? And at the sweet end of the menu, who's *not* offering creme brulee, pannacotta or affogato?

Imitation isn't so much flattery as a sign of the collective unconscious. Cookie-cutter menus may score fashion points but high-street cred sometimes comes at the expense of soul and personality. A little less (pork) belly and a touch more heart (we don't mean offal) could easily transform routine meals into rapture. And a bit more casalinga (home-style) amid the molecular wouldn't go astray either.

The good news is that standards continue to rise and getting a place in the *Good Food Guide 2008* is tougher than ever. Not even a score of 12 is a guarantee that a restaurant will make the grade. This year, we've introduced half points to refine the system further. You'll also find new entries marked. The bar has risen to 14.5 for a restaurant to earn a chef's hat. That said, the number of hatted establishments remains steady. Yes, we are a lucky lot.



Perfect roast chicken ... contemporary comfort food earns Glebe Point Diner (left) a chef's hat. Photos: Marco Del Grande