

WINE WOMEN & WASABI



Birdcage is not your average Japanese restaurant – warm surrounds and great wines abound. **By Suzan Ryan**

Japanese with a difference is probably the best way to describe Melbourne's Birdcage. Foregoing the stainless steel 'bare essentials' set-up many restaurants feel complement the clean lines and fresh taste of Japanese food,

Birdcage borrows an abundance of styles for its design as well as its food. "A wine bar with food to suit" is how co-owner Neil Prentice likes to think of it.

Breathing warmth into minimalism, the restaurant's interior belies its outside appearance: inside it's all bright spaces and New York loft style eaves, while outside it's casual streetfront dining with urban appeal. Interior seating offers both comfort and convenience: a burgundy leather booth-style bench seat hugs the wall, tucking up to lacquered tables with shiny wood chairs. Outside, bench seat tables sit under bright red umbrellas so customers can enjoy the summer sea breezes of St Kilda, or interior protection from a windy Melbourne winter.

Food-wise, Neil refers to the menu as Japanesque, "borrowing extensively and unapologetically from other Asian and European cooking traditions and techniques"

Signature dishes include takoyaki (Japanese pancake balls filled with octopus and spring onion) and age shu-mai (deep fried Japanese crab meat dim sims). The menu boasts a huge variety of soups, noodles, sushi and tapas, along with a small but palate-pleasing dessert menu. But it's the noodles that really beckon – if only due to a childlike desire to be noisy.

"It's taken as a compliment to the chef to hear vigorous slurping while you eat your noodles," says Neil. "Conversely, to eat your noodles in silence is like the joke about the French priest and the English woman: 'No, she wasn't dead, just English!'"

The food is prepared by Birdcage's two chefs, Anura Delpatricha (ex-Daimonji) and Mitsuo Shitsuda (ex-Burnham Beeches), who bring a range of styles to the menu. And the wine list is equally impressive as the food. Neil, a diehard wine buff, also owns his own wine label, Prentice Wines. His vineyard is situated 850 metres above the lush King Valley, in Gippsland, Victoria, which produces pinot noir and pinot gris. There, the altitude and weather can produce half a tonne to the acre of what Neil likes



to call "super juice" – his pinot noir. The vineyard is part of Neil's beef cattle property, Moondarra, which breeds black Wagyu cattle (the meat of which is a delicacy in Japan, as the breed are fed only beer, which produces an intensely delicate and flavoursome meat known as Kobe).

Fellow Birdcage owner, wine connoisseur and grape grower, Bruce Dowding, used to own Rochford Winery at Macedon ("producers of a brilliant pinot noir" says Neil). Overall, the partnership is ripe with the promise of unforgettable wine to complement the fresh and divine flavours of Birdcage's simple food philosophy.

And it won't break the budget either – daily lunch specials mean just \$10 will get you a glass of house wine, a bowl of Miso soup, a main meal of the day and a cup of coffee.

"We'd been looking for a site for



The warm tones of Birdcage's interior are in stark contrast to the simple Japanese cuisine.

this concept for two years," says Neil. "Originally, this was going to be called Manga (after the Japanese style of animation), but we had to call it the Birdcage because it's been known as that since the '60s when it was a place you went 'to pick up girls'. Actually, the former madam often comes in to eat," he laughs. "It's just that kind of place." ●

Birdcage

129 Fitzroy St,

St Kilda VIC 3182

Ph: (03) 9534 0277

Open Monday to Friday, noon to 1am. Saturdays 5pm to 1am.

Bookings taken until 7.30pm for parties fewer than six.

DIY GOURMET

BIRDCAGE'S HAND-MOULDED SUSHI NIGIRI

The Players

cooked, vinegared rice

HAND VINEGAR:

4 tbsp Japanese rice vinegar

250ml water

TOPPING:

two uncooked tiger prawn tails

1 fillet fresh tuna or salmon

(about 100g, skinned)

100g squid, cleaned and skinned

1 fillet sea bream (100g, skinned)

2 eggs, beaten

2 tbsp dashi or chicken stock

1 tsp mirin or sweet sherry

1 tsp Japanese soy sauce (shoyu)

2 tsp wasabi paste or powder

2 shiso leaves or basil leaves

1 piece nori seaweed cut into

5mm strips



The Game

Mix hand vinegar ingredients in a small bowl and set aside. Skewer a cocktail stick through each prawn from top to tail to prevent curling while cooking. Blanch in boiling water for two minutes until lightly cooked and pink. Drain and put under running water. Remove cocktail sticks, shells

and back vein. Make a slit up the belly lengthways and open out. Slice tuna or salmon and sea bream into pieces 7 x 3 x 1cm. Cut squid into similar pieces and make fine slits on one side of each to make more tender. Using beaten eggs, chicken stock, mirin and soy sauce, make an omelette. Put rolled omelette on sushi rolling mat and lightly roll into a flat rectangular shape. When cool, cut two pieces 7 x 3 x 1cm thick. Wet hands in vinegar mixture, take a handful (about 1–2 tbsp) of cooked rice in one hand and mould into rectangular cylinder about 5 x 2 x 2cm. Place wasabi on top and cover with opened prawn. Repeat, making two nigiri topped with prawns, two with tuna or salmon, two with sea bream, two with squid on top of a shiso leaf and two with omelette. Makes 8–10 pieces.