

BIRDcage

Where: 129 Fitzroy St, St Kilda

Phone: 9534 0277

Chef: Kazuhiko Nomura

Open: Noon-3pm Sun, Tues-Fri;
Sun, Tues-Sat 5-10.30pm

Parking: Commercial car park next door or
try the streets, but watch the signs

Cards: AE, BC, MC, Visa

Seats: 40

Liquor status: Licensed

Cost: About \$33 for three courses

Smoking: Segregated areas

dining out

Stephen Downes salutes a deft fusion of flavor and funk



BIRDcage marks the reappearance of talented chef-owner Kazuhiko Nomura, who disappeared a year or so back with the closure of Le Japon.

That place was Franco-Nipponese. BIRDcage borrows from other Asian and European cooking traditions and techniques, fusing a "Japanesque" style.

Judging from the general run of restaurants I saw in Japan earlier this year, I believe you'd have trouble finding anything like Nomura's food in Tokyo.

Try sour plum paste, basil and cheese wantons (sic), for instance. Or fresh bean curd with a Japanese ratatouille and ponzu sauce.

BIRDcage has a marvellously moody, theatrical feel. Compact, a bar as well as cafe, it has been inserted off the foyer of the George Seaview apartments. On the high Victorian ceiling is haphazardly ornate plasterwork; on the floor white mosaic tiles.

In between are black-lacquered tables and bench seating upholstered in a dark, red-brown vinyl.

Funky beyond description, with a stainless steel grill running to the ceiling, this is the kind of place in which Deckard would have had a shot of something strong before the showdown in *Blade Runner*.

Arriving in a deep round bowl, the sashimi salad featured a shelled and de-veined prawn tail and three slices each of tuna, hapuka and Atlantic salmon over a large amount of spiky and sparkling-crisp mizuna salad leaves.

Very thin arcs of purple onion, slices of avocado and a froth of bright orange fish roe also figured, and the lot was coated with a terrific light dressing.

Thin and slightly sweet batters — one flecked with herbs, the second faintly flavored with curry — coated four large arrowheads of a fairly bland and firmly gelatinous fishcake. Tempura vegetables accompanied.

Fattened on flat Australian beer — and a lot of grain — BIRDcage's Kobe beef comes paradoxically from Gippsland. Stewed cubes of it in a rich, brown, slightly spicy, sticky and complex braising reduction were brilliant; they had massive flavor and simply crumbled with tongue pressure. The stew lay over rice surrounded by a ring of mizuna leaves.

Five desserts finish the list, reminding you in their sparseness and lack of originality that you don't go to Asian-inspired restaurants for sweets.

Surrounded by a forest of nicely carved fresh fruit, the creme caramel was fine, garnished with a globe of vanilla-flecked icecream. Containing a green-tea custard cream and zorroed with a red-bean sauce, a large rectangular crepe was excellent — light and lovely.

IN SUMMARY

There's some deft cooking going on in the BIRDcage. As is the case with the best of Japanese-inspired food, it will reward those who appreciate subtlety — and originality, in this case.

Service was fine when we visited — only paper napkins, though. Better bottles on a very good wine list are pricey, but there is lots of choice by the glass.

Score: 16 out of 20



Fishcakes: one flecked with herbs, another flavored with curry. Picture: LUCY SWINSTEAD