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FEATURE

DINING

Menus of a geisha

BY SARINA LEWIS

THERE is a split-second moment when it looks like it could all go downhill. One by one they turn us away. Philippe Mouchel's city diner PM24 apologetically invites us to return another night, a tickets-only wine dinner already in progress. Trendy Coda welcomes us to try again at 9.30pm — unfortunate given the clock has barely ticked past 7.45pm. As for cool newcomer Chin Chin, though the smell is divine the prospect of an hour-long wait quickly cools our culinary ardour.

Freezing cold and thrice rejected, Melbourne skies conspire to further dampen deflating spirits, unleashing a depressing drizzle. It's here that Tresna Lee (aka the Geisha) comes into her own. Flipping two of us a \$20 note, she bundles our group of five into two taxis idling on the corner of Flinders Lane and Russell Street.

"Head for Huxtable on Smith Street," she says. A mere 10 minutes later we're warm, seated, sipping and chatting, ready for stage two of an evening that has already proven to be full of surprises.

Welcome to Geisha 2.0, the brain-

child of the 30-year-old waiter, blogger and food enthusiast, Lee. Since its launch four months ago, Lee has been re-creating a modern take on the geisha concept, steering food-loving locals, tourists and corporate clientele through a whistle-stop tour of the best of Melbourne's dining scene. The process is simple: log on, sign up and the ping of your email inbox will alert you to the time and meeting place of your assigned evening's tour. It's a clever concept given legs by Lee herself; at once eminently personable and astoundingly knowledgeable, this is the kind of shut-your-brain-down-and-just-have-fun adventure rarely experienced after childhood.

Greeted by an energised Lee as we mill at our prescribed meeting point before the windswept edifice of 118 Russell Street, we do a quick round of introductions: there's Kate, the social-media expert; and Ben, the head hunter; an English couple who have recently relocated; Kate, the chef, restaurateur and friend of Lee who can't get enough of these night-time adventures; and me, hungry journo.

The group is deliberately small. As any Melburnian knows, scoring seats

at the hottest addresses is comparable to an Olympic sport: tours are generally run Monday to Thursday with a maximum of five participants. Then there's the insider's instinct of knowing where to go and when.

It's for this reason Lee begins looking a little anxious when, at our first stop, Izakaya Den, the restaurateur apparently fails to note the emailed start time of 6.30pm "sharp". It's a place, Lee says, to either arrive early or come late. The steady stream of hungry punters descending before us are testament to her words. It's after 6.45pm when we head down out of the cold and towards a communal table and glasses of warm sake.

And we're off.

Lee takes charge of the ordering (food likes and dislikes, along with venue wish lists, are the first order of business upon meeting), leaving the rest of us to get to know each other. Our host's open personality and cheerful chat encourages the same and the vibe is instantly inclusive, cosy and relaxed. We nibble on black fried rice, chicken spare ribs with wasabi and nori, and pickled octopus, the banter moving from talk of vegan and



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raw food to childhood culinary peccadilloes. Conversation-stopping grilled mushrooms have us all scrambling to identify the flavours, so, too, a divine pot of honeybush tea.

“It smells like lilac,” ventures our social-media queen.

“It smells like a Lush soap shop,” laughs her headhunter partner.

Discreetly taking care of the bill, Lee ushers us out the door. (Cash is paid upfront, with all drinks, food and taxis taken care of by Lee thereafter.) With an aim to hit three or four venues

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on the three-hour tour, each visit is contained to about 45 minutes. Plenty of time, it turns out, to appreciate both atmosphere and menu.

Lee’s dish descriptions are spontaneous, evocative and best stored away for future reference: steak tartare and a glass of nebbiolo at Coda; the deep-fried school prawns with *nahm prik* at Chin Chin; or, during our later walk up Smith Street, the handy menu low-downs on Easy Tiger and its neighbour, Josie Bones.

In any case, once seated with Huxtable’s menu before us our unplanned diversion seems like a blessing in disguise. “We’ve got an 8.30pm booking but you can have the

table for 35 minutes,” the amenable maitre’d says. Lee makes the most of it: out come golf ball-sized orbs of molten olive-crumbed basil mozzarella; a table-winning grass-fed Wagyu tartare vibrant and fresh with Thai flavours; the surprisingly unforgettable Lebanese cauliflower on spicy harissa yoghurt. All washed down with a bottle of Prentice pinot gris.

Anada is next and — cosied up at the rear communal table — the conversation loosens as our waistbands tighten. The headhunter manfully makes up for the lightweight ladies, polishing off oysters, the succulent and smoky Otway Ranges pork belly (“It smells like Christmas”, says the happy restaurateur) and the fried Guernica peppers.

We talk high-school drinking habits (“I used to drink sherry by the bottle before going out”), cooking tips (“adding acid to chillies sends it off”) and food etiquette (“women who order a salad and start in on your chips — it’s really annoying”). By the end, it feels like touring the town with a well-informed group of friends.

It’s nearing 10pm and being a school night, I opt for a taxi home but the other three — led by Lee — decide dessert is in order. After hailing me a cab, she leads her flock in to the warm embrace of Cutler & Co for a sugar-fuelled last hurrah.

■ Five-hour evening adventures cost \$250; three-hour tours cost \$150. All tours, including coffee, market and produce tours can be organised on request. See geisha2.com