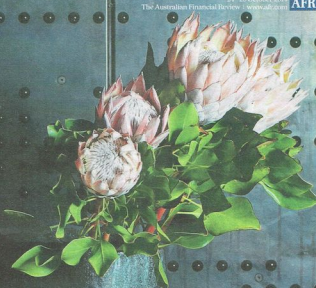


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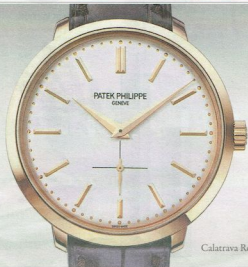


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FOOD HOTEL DINING

Consuming passions

Upscale dining in hotels is making a grand comeback with big names and star power, writes Paul Best

Is upscale hotel dining staging a comeback? You'd say, it's a question that can be fairly put with last week's earlier-than-anticipated opening of Pei Modern, Mark Best's bistronomic eatery, in Sydney's Four Seasons Hotel.

It follows Brent Savage moving his two-hatted Bentley from its Surry Hills digs to the CBD's Radisson Blu Plaza last December, the same month Pullman Hotels and Resorts announced chef Justin North as its culinary ambassador, an appointment designed to give the chain's restaurants a bone-china-rattling shake-up.

The year before, high-profile restaurateur Robert Marchetti joined QT hotels as creative food director, overseeing the launch of the award-winning Gowings Bar and Grill in Sydney and QT Canberra Capital Bar and Grill.

Restaurant & Catering chief executive John Hart says the embracing of a name or celeb chef makes a great deal of common – and commercial – sense for hotels. “It acknowledges hotel companies are particularly bad at running hotel restaurants,” Hart says, indicating the phenomenon has worked in Asia, Europe and the United States, where the Wolfgang Puck, Heston Blumenthal, Nobu Matsuhisa and the like have lent their name and star power.

Best sees it working here. “(Our) offering is compelling enough to get people to walk through the (Four Seasons) sliding doors, across the lobby and into the restaurant,” he says of Pei Modern, modelled on his Melbourne establishment of the same name, which sits at arm's length from the Sofitel in the porte-cochère at the “Paris end” of Collins Street.

But the arrangement benefits owners, chefs, Best and Savage, whose restaurants are autonomously operated within the hotel environment, see advantage in their city location. With Pei Modern, it's the attraction of sitting in Sydney's financial heart with a constant drip-feed of suits.

They also see a plus in sharing amenities. Best points to the Four Seasons' bakery, bakery, fishmonger and smoking rooms. “I'm very excited about that, making all our own character, things we can't do in a stand-alone restaurant,” he says. Savage says the hotel relationship offered the opportunity to blossom from 50 seats to 90 and take the Bentley to “a new and more sophisticated level”. Hart also indicates restaurateurs can profit from lower rents.

In addition, Luke Mangan – whose Glass Brasserie in partnership with Hilton Hotels is one of the long-standing examples, turning 10 next year – says there's 600-odd hotel restaurants, guaranteeing “there's something both Best (500 rooms) and Savage (300) appreciate. There's also no cash flow issues or back-of-house infrastructure with finance and accounting,” Mangan says. “A lot of freestanding places... can go broke very easily (when) they overlook those things.”

Luxury hotels baddy up with renowned chefs – in-house guests walking their dollars elsewhere to eat. A part of North's Pullman brief was primarily to encourage more hotel guests to dine in (lift numbers from 10 per cent to 20 or 40 per cent) – in-house guests walking their dollars elsewhere to eat. A part of North's Pullman brief was primarily to encourage more hotel guests to dine in (lift numbers from 10 per cent to 20 or 40 per cent) – in-house guests walking their dollars elsewhere to eat. A part of North's Pullman brief was primarily to encourage more hotel guests to dine in (lift numbers from 10 per cent to 20 or 40 per cent) – in-house guests walking their dollars elsewhere to eat.

Hotel hotels' new restaurant Monster is a case in point. The Canberra-based establishment sought to break the mould. “We designed it to engage with residents (near) the hotel Canberra community, not just rely on hotel guests,”



multire of at-large Michael Gray says. Full every night since opening with “Canberrans jumping all over us”, Monster has created something light-hearted, flexible and accessible with dishes offering locally and ethically-sourced ingredients, executive chef Sean McConnell says. It's also very hip – no damask, silver or gaudieron service, or waiters in tuxes. And always on – no microwave menu once you tick past 9pm.

Amalgamated Holdings' QT Sydney refashioned the notion of hotel dining, developing a brand around “experiential lifestyle” rather than a chef. “It's for people seeking out a real experience in a hotel stay... to be totally immersed in local culture,” explains David Seagrant, group managing director. “A significant part of that is the restaurant and bar.”

With QT's Gowings – last month voted one of 2014's 10 Great Hotel Restaurants by *Hotels* magazine, the first Australian to be honoured – Marchetti set about creating “an entertainment venue that just happened to have rooms attached” to attract creative types and well as high-demanding millennials and gen X-ers. “We're being disruptors of hotels in Australia, I believe,” says Marchetti from



Bali. “I see QT as a party everyone is invited to.” He similarly adopted a “theatrical” approach for Canberra with a nostalgic politico-style featuring old favourites – devils on horseback, vel-au-vent – with modern, healthy twists. In 2016, QT will open in Melbourne – a city whose upmarket hotels used to boast a wealth of headline chefs (Sofitel's Le Restaurant with Raymond Capaldi, Park Hyatt's Rudi with Paul Wilson, Iain Hewitson's Memories of the Mediterranean at Rockman's Regency). More recently, it's the boutique establishments – the Adelphi with Teague Eazard and The Prince's heated Circa, particularly when Matt Wilkinson was in the kitchen.

The big exception is Crown Melbourne with its fleet of flagship name restaurants: Neil Fyrie's Rockpool, Rosetta and Spice Theatre; Guillaume Brahimi's anonymous bistro; and Nobu (Crown Perth) also has these chefs. Next year, Crown will be the second hotel after London's Mandarin Oriental to offer Dinner by Heston Blumenthal once his Michelin-star The Fat Duck's six-month residence closes. “We're being disruptors of hotels as gains currency, such as Norm's month-

Clockwise from main: Hanger Steak at Pei Modern, Sean McConnell at hotel hotel's Monster restaurant, Glass Brasserie at Sydney's Hilton and restaurateur Robert Marchetti. PHOTOS: ADAM BRILLZONE, ROHAN THOMSON, PETER BRAGG

We're being disrupters of hotels in Australia. Robert Marchetti QT Hotels

long tenancy at Tokyo's Mandarin Oriental Next January and chef Gaggan Anand's three dinners at The Landmark Mandarin Oriental last month. “You need the name but also the personality that drives it,” says Mark Holmes, Crown's executive general manager, food and beverage.

You also need to find what works for both parties. According to Holmes, Crown will use the name, pay a franchise fee and operate the restaurant; let the name chef run the restaurant with Crown leaving a hand in the day-to-day analysis of profit and loss; or remain at arm's length from the restaurateur and simply take a percentage (7-12 per cent) of takings. But it's horses for courses. In Sydney, Echo Entertainment owns BLACK by Eazard – with Teague Eazard managing the place – which is a part of Sydney's Star entertainment complex, also featuring Stefano Manfredi's Balla and David Chang's Momofuku Seaboo.

But in Melbourne, he owns his restaurant in the Adelphi but leases the space. The phenomenon has also spread beyond the capital cities, in popular holiday destinations – Rick Stein at Bannisters, Manfredi at Bells the best examples. Shannon Bennett is also turning Burnham Beeches mansion in Victoria's Dandenongs into a premium eat-and-stay destination.

However, “the top chef top hotel” enterprise is still full of risks. Marchetti's Giuseppe, Arnaldo & Sons at Crown closed after the company behind the venture went into liquidation last year, reportedly with debts of about \$1.6 million.

Hilton at Melbourne's South Wharf bade fly-in fly-out Spanish Michelin-star chef Ramon Freixa and his cuisine failed to fire. Hamish Ingham's Woods also didn't last. “It's not that [the restaurant] didn't work, it wasn't right for us in terms of timing,” Ingham says. **BF**