

THE AUSTRALIAN

Monster restaurant, like Canberra's Hotel Hotel, is a mould-breaker

JOHN LETHLEAN THE AUSTRALIAN OCTOBER 04, 2014 12:00AM



Monster restaurant, Canberra. Picture: Stefan Postles Source: Supplied

SENT away at 12 to improve my chances in the jungle of life, distinct memories linger of that last meal before incarceration, a long night with my parents at an inner-city motel.

The boy was miserable. The mother more so. And so a vast bowl of “caviar” was ordered, last supper before the gruel of institutionalised tucker became a daily burden.

You see, I simply loved what we called “caviar” in those days, the black (or red) lumpfish roe that came in glass jars and burst in the mouth with fishy, salty pleasure. Mum wanted to spoil her eldest. This conscience-salving bowl of fish eggs was the equivalent of about five jars. Huge. I ate it all, of course, and whether it was emotions, “caviar” or both, it made me ill. So began a long aversion to hotel restaurants. I was scarred.

Monster doesn't serve “caviar” or caviar. It's not like many hotel restaurants, either. There have been terrific exceptions in recent years to the rule that all Australian hotel restaurants stink: Monster, at Canberra's new and delicious Hotel Hotel, is another one.

The hotel is a mould-breaker, just oozing design sense and an aesthetic attention to detail not normally associated with Australian hostelry. There's a renaissance of architecture and style in this part of our capital and Monster is at the centre of it all: a bustling, quirky foyer space that morphs from trout hash browns and espresso in the morning to Sean McConnell's modern, unstructured food at night with a local riesling or maybe a new-wave Sicilian red.

Monster walks a defiantly non-corporate line in most respects: fitout, accessories, furnishings,

soundtrack ... from the Mud plates to the copper table tops to the Cuisenaire rods of stacked concrete lining the structure. And, like the host hotel, Monster has a collection of Canberra's best floor staff. Their warmth shines in the morass of hipster indifference that is modern Canberra dining. Sorry Canberra.

McConnell's menu is, essentially, a selection of shared plates in two sizes. It's big on ethical provenance, a kind of "un-plated" plating and vegetables. Like the unusual combo of thick, salt-baked celeriac slices, whipped fontina and a ragged nest of grated truffle and fried celeriac shreds to garnish. Or the almost irresistible pairing of broccoli and broccolini florets, fresh chilli, baby pine nuts, lemon juice and thin strands of Ortiz anchovy.

Or, best of the lot, McConnell's Japanesque dish of sweet-and-savoury soy and sesame-roasted eggplant with smoked goat's curd, black and white sesame, wafers of nori and katsuobushi (fermented, dried and smoked tuna) and discs of shaved black water radish. It's the first "wow". The second is a sexy, gunmetal grey bowl of big, springy, robustly fresh clams in a broth of oloroso, saffron, fresh fennel, garlic, parsley and seawater.

McConnell's food has no distinctive ethnic handle but he references Spain frequently. Indeed, a plate of crisp-skinned Suzuki mullet, from Palmers Island Mullet in northern NSW, is flavoured with almond (butter), salty cured tuna, broad beans, peas and charred onion. It has something of the Iberian about it, too. How you categorise a dish of crisp-skinned pork belly pieces, chewy/salty cured pig's ear strands, chilli threads and an Asian salad of herbs and garlic stems is up to you.

Monster has a clever (and not particularly avaricious) wine list, and a few very likable desserts: the mandarin soufflé, for example, that comes with chocolate sorbet; or the Japanese green tea pannacotta with thinly sliced nashi, yuzu caramel, basil seeds and puffed rice.

Also, whoever programs the music does so with a style and wit completely at one with the whole place. Which is to say, not very hotel-like at all. Hope it catches on.

Address: Hotel Hotel, 25 Edinburgh Ave, Canberra

Phone: (02) 6287 6287 Web: monsterkitchen.com.au

Hours: Lunch, dinner daily

Typical prices: Small plates \$18; large plates \$28; desserts \$16

Summary: Check in, check it out

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Stars: 3.5 out of 5

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