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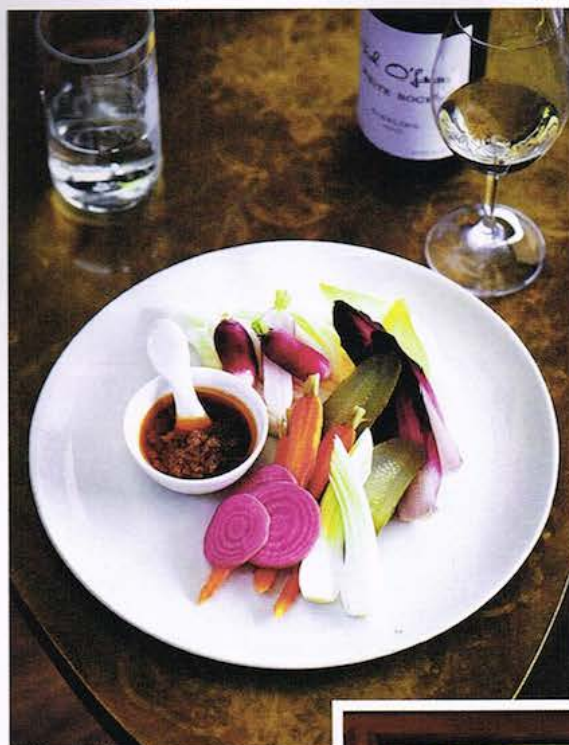
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MAÎTRES D'HOTEL
Chef Sean McConnell
(left) and manager
Michael Gray. Right: raw
and pickled vegetables
with bagna cauda.



Raising the capital

Monster has the requisite wow-factor but, more than that, it has charm and ambition matched only by its performance, writes **Pat Nourse**.

Reviewing restaurants is an essentially subjective business, but I'm going to hit you with a statistic: the last time I was in Canberra I ate at Monster four times in four days. You hear a lot about the wow-factor when people talk restaurants, and Monster has plenty of that, but it also rates very highly on the usability scale. There's a lot to be said for the restaurant that's there for you when you need it. We live in an age where many venues seem to want to make a point of inverting the traditional hospitality relationship, so finding somewhere that still asks what it can do for you rather than the other way around is refreshing. In this telling, The Monster that Ate Canberra found the city racing towards its maw.

Part of the reason it's so accommodating is because it's in the business of accommodation. Monster occupies the lobby of Hotel Hotel, the most interesting boutique lodgings in the country, and it exists to serve the hotel's guests as well as the punter off the street. To the restaurant's great credit, it balances both needs with flair. So far it seems like a healthy symbiosis: without the backing of the larger hotel project, an operator might struggle to open so thoroughly realised a space, while on the other side of the coin, the restaurant brings life into the room, and keeps it from becoming an arid plain dotted with drones staring flat-eyed into their screens.

The kitchen at Monster is run by Sean McConnell, who's also across the dangerously hip Močan & Green

Grout café. In designing the menu, he appears to have taken inspiration from Cumulus Inc, the acclaimed Melbourne restaurant owned by his brother and fellow chef Andrew. (Another brother, Matt, is the brains behind Bar Lourinhã and Casa Ciuccio. Mother McConnell must've packed a lunchbox to be reckoned with.) Cumulus is known for its take-all-comers approach to offering the would-be diner everything from a single oyster or a Martini to a feast. And like Cumulus, Monster turns on the charm from early in the morning till the witching hour, with plenty to satisfy all, even those who roll in when most other kitchens in town are closed, whether it's in the late afternoon or after midnight.

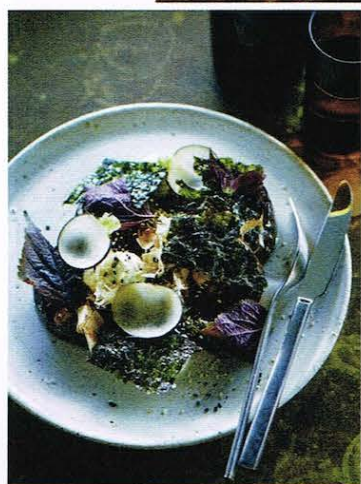
A lot of trouble has been taken to design a site-specific package, yet there's a have-it-your-way ethos at work here that's very easy to like. The business traveller can show up after 10 in the evening, drop her bags at reception, pull up a seat at the bar and expect to eat and drink well. It might only be the bar menu, but this is nonetheless revolutionary in the capital.

You want that oyster? It could be one of the Clair de Lunes Steve Feletti grows off Batemans Bay, or the rocks that Shane Buckley farms at Wapengo Lake, near Bermagui. And the Martini? There's a battery of gins, but the house mix is West Winds Sabre, Dolin vermouth and olives. You want to play it fresh and light? Cured kingfish textured with black rice and flavoured with green tea and pickled ginger could be you. Or a>



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Scan this page with the free **viewa** app to see a full menu from Monster or to contact the restaurant.



The dining room is *something else*. The sun pokes through a Swiss cheese of holes in the looming concrete ceiling.

mighty tasty plate of raw, pickled vegetables – radishes, spicy cukes, beets, carrots, baby fennel and leaves of witlof – all that virtue offset by a deliciously savoury and anchovy-rich bagna cauda dipping sauce.

What about something more comfortably, well, fatty? I'm not in love with the house take on the pork bun. On the menu it reads "38-hour pork neck bao with cucumber kimchi", which puts me in mind of a Momofukuish number packed with juicy slices of meat. What you get instead is the same sort of bun (they're yet to nail the texture) stuffed with a crumbed puck of shredded meat, and even with a generous helping of that kimchi, it's still pretty dry. A work in progress.

If you've been delving deep into the beer list, blowing the hoppy froth off a couple of 4 Pines kölsches, you might target the bacalao churros. They're salt cod-filled tubes, all asquiggle on the plate. True, the narrowness of their gauge (they're about as thick as a fat udon noodle) means the ratio of friedness to filling is a bit much, and they're on the oily side, but that's where the beers come in handy. Their fellows on the bar menu, the hand-cut chips, score massive points at our table, even though they're served with herby salt, that blight of the fried potato genre. No one really wants herbs with their chips. Fat and puffy, these chips are served on a small cast-iron skillet (which keeps them warm, unlike those pointless and newly popular twee mini-fryer baskets), done with the skin on and a proper amount of salt. A good chip in a hotel is a very hard thing to find. These are morsels of joy.

The yabby jaffle is another straight-up win. (Just saying those syllables out loud is comforting: "yabby jaffle". Ahh.) Everyone's favourite freshwater crustacean crammed into a classic golden Breville-style crimped-edge toastie, juiced up with a smear of crème fraîche and a good whack of horseradish.

McConnell's eye for more elegant composition gets more of a showing on the shared plates menu, which is served from noon until 10 in the evening. Even when he steps up the fanciness his constructions seldom want for savour. Taking inspiration from agedashi tofu, he tops a lush eggplant dish with shavings of the dried smoked tuna known as katsubushi. The heat from the dish makes them writhe and twist in a most engaging way. To this intriguing picture he adds small leaves of shiso, slices of crunchy black radish and swatches of toasty nori. There's a scattering of sesame in there and an entirely un-Japanese dollop of smoked goat's curd. It's such a good almost-vegetarian dish it's almost enough to make you an almost-vegetarian.

The dollop-of-dairy approach serves him well elsewhere, too. Yoghurt ties together a gutsy shredded lamb shoulder, prettily concealed with a nest of golden pistachio slivers and pomegranate seeds under a découpage of brik pastry and crisped-up vine leaves. It's labne that moistens a plate of warm sourdough and dukkah, meanwhile. Kudos to McConnell for turning dukkah into something a sane person might willingly order in a restaurant, too. His version is fluffy, its taste bright, suggesting it was made fresh, and he

PLATE CLASS

Above: eggplant with smoked goat's curd, katsubushi and sesame.

tops it with crushed dried rose petals. Dude's got an eye.

They do a kibbeh nayeh here, with beef in place of the traditional lamb, served raw and finely chopped with the untraditional yet welcome addition of harissa, pickles and a cured egg yolk. Scooped up on crisp flatbread, it's a tartare of substance.

That same level of thought goes into dessert and breakfast, too. An attractively shallow crema Catalana, spiked with Pedro Ximénez and studded with hunks of spiced quince and sublime Marcona almonds, brings the day to a close with quiet flair, just as a hash brown of Snowy River trout with soft herbs and a fried egg or the house-made crumpets with Hotel Hotel honey (from "hive #9" no less) provide ample motivation to rise and shine.

The sun pokes through a Swiss cheese of holes in the looming concrete ceiling. Even in this age of bespoke everything, the dining room is something else. If there's not a band playing in a corner, the playlist, designed by Woody McDonald, a DJ much loved on his native RRR FM in Melbourne, trips from Dinosaur Jr to the Tom Tom Club. Over the course of a meal you might encounter pots and bowls crafted by Valerie Restarick and glasses and carafes upcycled from old bottles by Amos Enders-Moje. Adam Goodrum's coat hanger-backed chairs and his rhomboid, diamond-patterned timber tables are scattered throughout the room, but drinkers and diners might just as likely perch by the fire, stand admiring the row of bikes supplied for hotel guests or cosy up in a library alcove stacked with Perimeter books.

It could all seem a bit bloody precious and exhausting were it not done so well and delivered with a sense of fun. Inclusiveness is the order of the day here and the staff seem keen to share the toys.

Manager Michael Gray cuts an urbane figure (the determinedly flip Hotel Hotel website notes that he has "very, very good hair"), and it would be easy to view him simply as an excellent piece of casting. But



CREMA OF THE CROP

Crema Catalana with spiced quince and almonds (left). Below: Hotel Hotel's home, the Nishi building.



he's more than decorative; his understated affability seems to be the model for the way the staff here interact with guests. He's also responsible for the wine list, and for that he has our thanks. Canberra district wines are here in force, but so too are smart picks from France, Germany, Greece and Spain. The apéritifs are thoughtful, and the sakes and ciders don't appear to be token. It's a list that has plenty happening in the sub-\$60 range, with enough interest in upper-reaches to satisfy urges classical (Mount Mary and Montrachet, Latour and Barbaresco) and more contemporary (Egly-Ouriet Champagne, mountain madness from Gravner and Radikon). They also stock Coopers Sparkling, and pull a pretty damned fine coffee.

Monster is something new, a place worth taking a detour to savour. But it's priced and positioned in a way that demands it be used a lot, and it has the nuance and heft to stand up to – and reward – repeat custom. In shooting for something beyond "good for Canberra", Monster is admirable in its ambition. The real genius, though, was making it part and product of its city. **CA**

Monster

Hotel Hotel, 25 Edinburgh Ave, Acton, ACT, (02) 6287 6287, hotel-hotel.com.au
Licensed.

AE MC V EFT

Open Daily 6.30am-1am

Prices Entrées \$14-\$21, main courses \$26-\$29, desserts \$14-\$18.

Vegetarian Three entrées, three main courses.

Noise Appealingly buzzy.

Wheelchair access Yes.

Minus Orders can get lost in busy services.

Plus A bold new eatery for Canberra, and very accessible to boot.

AND ALSO

Backflipping

Though it enjoyed success as a nightclub, the recent lockout laws

put a crimp in the late-night follies at **The Cliff Dive**, so it's been retooled with more of a cocktail and snack focus (the same great tunes and kooky New Guinea-tiki vibe remain). Down a Jungle Bird (spiced rum, Campari, pine and lime) as you gnaw grilled things on sticks: pork with turmeric and lemongrass, say, or beef with wild ginger. **The Cliff Dive**, 16-18 Oxford Sq, Darlinghurst



Mint condition

At **Bistro Mint**, the new breakfast and lunch eatery upstairs at the historic Macquarie Street building, there's plenty of interest in the Gallic-leaning menu, whether it's the liquorice crumb with radishes and goat's curd, the Basque twist to the beef tartare, or the way the flathead is steamed with wine in an iron pot over rock salt tableside before it's served with gnocchi, cime di rapa and a classic beurre blanc. Smart wine and service make it bankable. **Bistro Mint**, 10 Macquarie St, Sydney, (02) 9232 2293

Pizza perfect

The magic and the madness of Lane Cove pizza perfectionists **Via Napoli** have extended successfully to Hunters Hill. Luigi Esposito and his team have made fast friends at their new branch: it's big, has plenty of parking, and the food is aces. Consider the two-metre-long pizza, which runs from Vesuvio toppings to salsiccia and friarelle to crudo and rucola to Margherita then (deep breath) marinara. **Via Napoli Hunters Hill**, Shop 1, 64-68 Gladesville Rd, Hunters Hill, (02) 9816 3600