

# A DECADE OF FINE DINING

BY ELIZABETH MERYMENT



**“Las Vegas is a global food destination. Melbourne’s Crown Casino has similar ambitions. So a single fine diner in a suburban RSL seems a fairly modest proposition in comparison. What’s more, it’s great.”**

So begins the inaugural entry into the Good Food Guide of the Fairfield RSL’s La Tratt restaurant. That was for the guide’s 2008 edition. A decade later, La Tratt has made its 10th consecutive appearance in the esteemed food bible, an achievement that crowns it as one of the true stayers of the Sydney food world.

A groundbreaker in its day, being one of the first fine diners to appear in a RSL, La Tratt has this year achieved its highest score yet, at 14.5 out of 20, with the review describing the Italian fine diner as having a “dedication to classic fine dining that’s rarely seen in Sydney any more”, “friendly, attentive service” and as being “luxurious”.

For Fairfield Chief Executive Officer Anthony Sobb, the decade of appearances in the Good Food Guide is a significant achievement, especially considering this year’s guide is not exclusively New South Wales-based, but an Australia-wide tome. Its nationalisation has seen many venues, especially those not in the inner-city, fall off this year’s list.

“Proud is probably not the word,” Anthony says when describing the ongoing achievements of La Tratt. “I just feel such deep gratitude in being able to present this wonderful, soulful and spiritual gastronomic experience, along with all of the staff, to the customers of La Tratt. It’s an experience and gift to our customers that we take very seriously.”

La Tratt was conceived and constructed by Anthony back in 2007, right at the time of a movement that saw the knitting together fine dining and gaming around the world. From Las Vegas to London to Macau, casinos and clubs began offering customers experiences beyond the gaming tables, in the process luring top chefs to their venues and investing in world-class dining rooms. Many of the world’s top restaurants are now located in casinos and clubs.

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Fairfield RSL was a part of the movement that remains strong to this day. Back then La Tratt’s opulent fit-out, fireplaces, fine crockery and polished staff surprised some guests but it was then chef Robert Green’s dishes, which included White River veal with porcini mushroom ragu and a four cheese risotto, which impressed most.

Today’s chef, Tristan Hodge, offers perhaps an even more ambitious list, that includes classics like vitello tonnato (poached veal with tuna sauce), gnocchi di aragosta (gnocchi with lobster, tomato passata, chilli, cream, basil and shallots) and spalla di agnello (slow-cooked lamb shoulder). It is cuisine that this year’s guide praises lavishly, with the lobster gnocchi (“so soft and luxurious”) a “must try”.

From 2007 to today, La Tratt’s inspiration has come from a number of classic Italian cookbooks including The Silver Spoon, Guy Grossi’s My Italian Heart and Lucio Galletto’s Ligurian Kitchen.

Over the years, the restaurant has kept up with trends, including reducing food miles and adhering to environmentally sustainable practice. These days, honey used in the restaurant comes from bees that live in a hive on the RSL’s rooftop, while the herbs used in the kitchen are grown onsite.

Anthony says the idea that has always shaped Fairfield RSL’s thinking has always been to “see things differently”.

“We have always wanted to offer something totally unique and an alternative to what was available to people in this area,” Anthony says.

This was especially true a decade ago when the restaurant was built.

“People were surprised when we opened. Some were even possibly intimidated, particularly when you consider the fit-out, menu design and price point of the restaurant. There really was no other Registered Club (or even restaurant in our immediate area for that matter) that was offering this kind of gastronomic experience.

“But as time moved on, people began to experience the gastronomy of La Tratt and momentum gathered and it has become the popular restaurant it is today. It was certainly a case of ‘build it and they will come’.”

Anthony’s vision has seen the restaurant outlast most of the other venues listed in the Good Food Guide’s 2008 edition. A scan through the voluminous pages of that book show that the vast majority of restaurants featured then have now closed or changed into something new, while a handful of true stayers remain.

La Tratt is in the esteemed company of some of Sydney’s most recognisable restaurants who have lasted the decade in the Guide, including: Bambini Trust, the Bathers’ Pavilion, the Bentley, Bodega, Buon Ricordo, Catalina, China Doll, Cottage Point Inn, Courtney’s Brasserie, Est, Flying Fish, Golden Century, Icebergs, Jonah’s, Lucio’s, Longrain, Oscillate Wildly, Otto, Pilu at Freshwater, Quay, Sails on Lavender Bay and Sean’s Panaroma.

For Anthony, part of La Tratt’s staying power has been its evolutionary tendencies, meaning it has continued to push boundaries while remaining accessible and enjoyable for diners.

“It certainly is not the same restaurant that it was 10 years ago (it’s not the same restaurant it was one year ago),” he says.

“La Tratt has been a living and breathing gastronomic experience that continues to evolve and develop. It is with this in mind that long-term diners revisit and in turn introduce new diners to the La Tratt experience. In fact, the popularity of La Tratt is due to its constant evolution without letting go of its core gastronomic principles of quality, product and service.”

Anthony points to a number of menu changes over the years that have resulted in finer touches for the menu.



“We have brought in a delicate truffle veloute with a parmesan crisp to commence the dining experience, plus a beautifully handcrafted seafood trolley that is manoeuvred from table to table, presenting diners with our fish monger’s crustaceans and fish of the day on mounds of crushed ice.

“We also have an elegant fine-dining champagne and aperitif trolley, presented to each table at the beginning of the night, plus a ‘cut of the day’, a grade nine marbled sirloin beef Wagyu that we present theatrically under a glass cloche.

“On top of that, all glassware (including water) is now served in the famous Riedel glassware.”

For Fairfield RSL guests, one of the beauties of the success of La Tratt is that it has led to the establishment of other great restaurants at the club, including the French brasserie, Montagne.

“The popularity of La Tratt certainly made way for broadening our mindset and strategies pertaining to all of our restaurants,” Anthony says. “Montagne, our French sister restaurant, is definitely the ‘direct descendant’ of La Tratt.

“It is also the basis of our newest restaurant concept of Vietnamese fine dining Hoi An House, which will be opening in early 2018.”

Let’s hope the success of La Tratt, and the excellent newer restaurants in the stable, continues for at least another decade.

