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your ultimate food guide

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The top drop going  
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# Join the (five-star) club

The local clubs taking on  
Sydney's finest restaurants



# FANCY SEEING you here

Once the home of swirly carpets and the \$10 schnitzel, Sydney's clubs are throwing up some surprising fine diners



ELIZABETH MERYMENT

It cost \$1.4 million to build, has 180 bottles of a French liqueur virtually impossible to find elsewhere in Australia, and is modelled on New York's most successful French restaurant. But you won't find Montagne in Circular Quay, Bridge St, Rose Bay or Bondi.

Rather, this exclusive 65-seat French brasserie which opened in December, is at Fairfield RSL, the latest in a group of impressive restaurants at the club that includes a \$1.2 million sister restaurant, the up-market Italian ristorante La Tratt.

Welcome to the new face of club dining in Sydney. Disappearing are the dusty club bistros of yesteryear with lurid 1980s carpet, imported fish and chips, cheap steaks and frozen chicken schnitzels. Rather, today's clubs are in the grips of a restaurant renovation frenzy, with millions being spent on luxurious fit-outs and sophisticated food.

"When you come to the Fairfield RSL we want to give the feeling of walking into a five-star hotel," says Fairfield RSL chief executive officer, Anthony Sobb. "We want to make the experience special. Here, everyone can be treated like a somebody."

When Sobb devised the idea of Montagne, a bistro modelled on New York's Balthazar brasserie, he really went to work, tearing out an existing restaurant, devising a menu of bistro classics borrowed from the cookbooks of chefs like Paul Bocuse, and introducing a strictly French wine list. The Charteuse bottles added sparkle. "We want the club to be a gastronomic destination of the west," Sobb says.

Fairfield RSL is one of a growing band of clubs that realise today's



patrons are culinary literate and interested in more than pushing coins into pokies. ClubsNSW figures show food revenue across the state last year reached \$866.2 million, up from \$640 million in 2004. In the same period, club membership rose from 4.8 million to 5.7 million.

"In the last five years there has been a dramatic shift in the quality of food provided by clubs because they are responding to the demands of their members," says ClubsNSW chief executive officer Anthony Ball. "People don't want the old chicken schnitzel and cheap steak any more. Well, you can still get those things, but you can also get degustation."

Bankstown Sports Club CEO Mark Condi agrees a shift is happening. "Sure we have gaming — you can't get away from that," Condi says. "But a lot of clubs — about a third — in NSW are struggling. And the clubs that have succeeded have realised it's not just about gaming anymore."

The scale of the investment at Bankstown Sports is huge. One of

Sydney's biggest clubs with 65,000 members, it is about to start a \$2 million renovation to create an Asian dining precinct to rival its existing Italian precinct, La Piazza. The new area will include a noodle house and upmarket Chinese restaurant.

"Clubs are not-for-profit," says Condi. "So all the money raised has got back into the core purpose of that club or reinvested into that business." He says investment in food and beverage is usually repaid in greater patronage and higher spends.

"When we opened La Piazza, we thought our other food and beverage offerings would take a while to recover," he says. "But in fact we had increased demand."

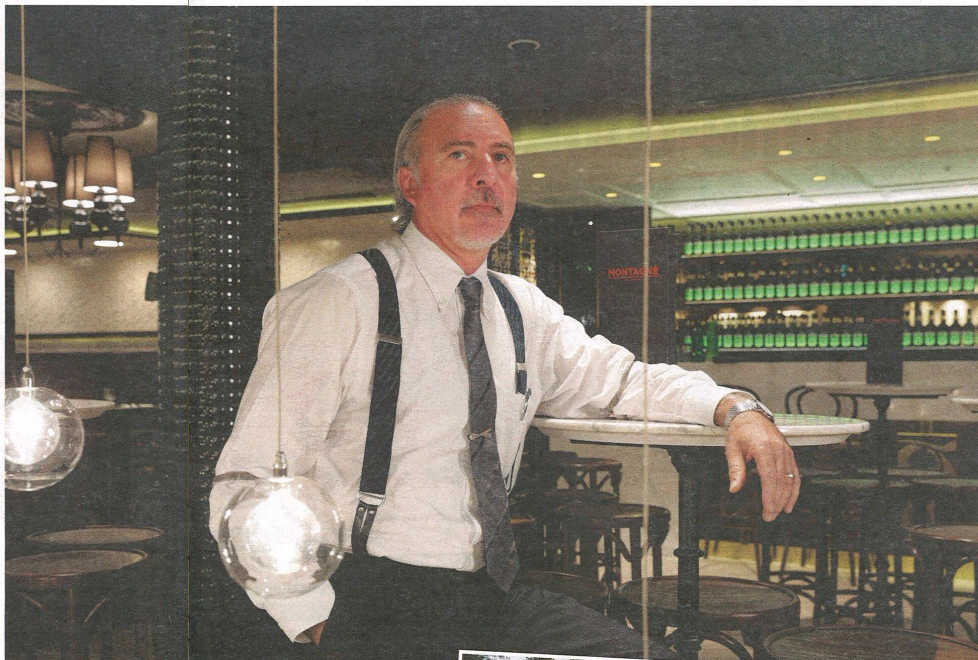
Restaurateur Con Dedes, who opened Watergrill at Cronulla RSL in November, says the \$6 million renovation has been a huge hit.

"It's gone better than we could have expected," says Dedes. "And there's no doubt there's a movement of change with clubs. People know more about food than they used to."

Since Watergrill opened, the RSL's membership has jumped from 15,000 to 20,000, and turnover has jumped. It's a similar situation at the Hellenic Club, in Sydney's CBD, which opened the gorgeous Alpha last year. With acclaimed chef Peter Conistis at the helm and a \$4 million upgrade, the restaurant has become a city hot spot.

"Some people, when they walk into a club, expect the food will be disappointing and quite often it's not to the quality or level it should be," says Hellenic Club CEO Arthur Balayannis. "But today this is a very competitive space and it's very transparent and you have to be good. And people don't care if you're in a club or not."

Clockwise from top: Anthony Sobb at Montagne in Fairfield RSL; Watergrill at Cronulla RSL; chocolate tart at Montagne; and Oriental Jewel at Easts. Main picture: John Fotiadis



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We want the club to be a gastronomic destination

ANTHONY SOBB, FAIRFIELD RSL

## Top 10 diners in clubland

**Alpha at the Hellenic Club**  
238 Castlereagh St, Sydney

Big-name chef Peter Conistis creates memorable Greek village-inspired food (right) in elegant surrounds at this CBD hotspot.

**Montagne at Fairfield RSL**

14 Anzac Ave, Fairfield  
Inspired by New York's Balthazar, this beautifully appointed French bistro offers authentic Gallic food.

**Watergrill at Cronulla RSL**

38 Gerald St, Cronulla  
Restaurateur Con Dedes has installed a casual bistro menu with a heavy seafood focus into the heavily upgraded RSL.

**Osoo at Penrith Panthers**

123 Mulgoa Rd, Penrith  
This impressive steakhouse could be set in the CBD, such is its dark and steamy sex appeal. All steaks are listed by provenance.

**Oriental Jewel at Easts Leagues**

93 Spring St, Bondi Junction

Upmarket Cantonese food is here served in an attractively renovated room. Cooking is fresh and precise and the value reasonable.

**Dynasty at Canterbury Leagues**

26 Bridge Rd, Belmore

Often named as one of the best club restaurants in town, Dynasty offers traditional Cantonese flavours done with modern flair.

**Infinity Bar at Revesby Workers' Club**

28 Brett St, Revesby

Several massive renovations have seen this club's bars completely transformed. Infinity Bar specialises in champagne, exotic cocktails and craft beers, and the fitout is spectacular.

**Clubhouse at Surf Lifesaving Australia**

789 Botany Rd, Rosebery

This cool cafe/restaurant features ex Barrio Chino chef Rafael Tonon offering dishes of beetroot pizette and chargrilled corn with chipotle mayo.

**Golden Times at Wests Ashfield Leagues**

115 Liverpool Rd, Ashfield

This Cantonese restaurant has a reputation for offering some of the better yum cha in Sydney.

**Pho @ Fairfield RSL**

14 Anzac Ave, Fairfield

The red walls of this exotic-looking Vietnamese venue represent good luck, and good luck will be yours if you try the very good beef pho.

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• Read Elizabeth Meryment's review of Montagne in The Sunday Telegraph.

