

SPRING 2021

DEPARTURES

*A New Spin on
Irish Linen*

*Isles of
Wonder*

*The Creative
Home*

*Revisiting
the Rhine*

MODERN LEGACY

Is This Australia's Next Great Dining City?

Just an hour from Melbourne, the former industrial powerhouse of Geelong is booming again, with ambitious chefs creating a constellation of standout restaurants. *by Carrie Hutchinson*



Above: pickled turnip dusted in the powder of its own leaf on a shiitake mushroom at Igni

IF YOU WERE to trace the trajectory of Geelong's transformation, you'd go back to early 2016. Chef Aaron Turner, who had trained at Noma and El Celler de Can Roca and made a name for himself at his restaurant Loam on Victoria's Bellarine Peninsula, had returned home after a couple of years in Nashville to open

Igni (restaurantigni.com). It wasn't long before the 28-seat, tasting-menu-only eatery was winning the hearts of critics and diners. Within a year, Turner and Igni had won a slew of awards, including Chef of the Year and Regional Restaurant of the Year at The Age Good Food Guide Awards.

Counterside dining at Felix



That could have been it. *Igni* opens, people travel from far and wide to eat there, but little else changes. But Geelong is proving the small city that could, with chefs, many of whom are former locals, bringing their skills to this city in flux.

Their enthusiasm has been matched by local government, which has invested in a regeneration of city spaces, including Little Malop Street. Forming part of the city's cultural zone, it is now also a thriving dining precinct, with the outdoor tables lining its footpaths. You can slurp down a bowl of noodles at **Sober Ramen** (soberramen.com.au) or taste wines from neighbouring regions at **Geelong Cellar Door** (geelongcellardoor.com.au). More recent arrivals include **The Arborist** (thearboristgeelong.com.au), a Middle Eastern-influenced restaurant built around an ash tree, and three casual spots by Aaron Turner: **Tacos y Liquor** (instagram.com/tacosyliquor), **OK Smash** (it specialises in cheeseburgers, instagram.com/ok.smash) and **The Hot Chicken Project** (thehotchickenproject.com), the result of his Nashville experience.

This is a far different scene to the one an hour away in Melbourne. It's more intimate, but rather than lack of size becoming a burden, it's allowed some chefs to break new culinary ground. They work in ways they feel are true to their own styles and give guests an experience they might not receive elsewhere.

Baah Lah!'s produce – walnuts and mulberries, for instance – comes from the family farm in Katandra, in Victoria's north

Brian Anderson opened the doors to **Baah Lah! Dining** (baahlabdining.com) in September 2019 and is refreshingly candid about his aspirations for the eatery where the flavours of Asia sing. "We want to do nice food," he says. "We want to make it accessible to everyone, and keep it simple – let the original flavour shine. We don't want to anything that's too complicated or have 10 garnishes for every piece of protein on the plate."

One unique aspect of *Baah Lah!* is that some of its produce – walnuts and mulberries, for instance – comes

from the family farm in Katandra, in Victoria's north. "Dad actually handpicks those mulberries every day, or every second day, then puts them in the freezer," Anderson explains. "No other restaurant can get that sort of produce unless they go out and pick it themselves."

It's not the only influence on the menu, which includes classics like chicken pot stickers, as well dishes like pan-seared barramundi with fresh green curry and rolled rice noodle, and deep-fried ice cream with walnuts, Scotch fingers and salted caramel.



From left: sampling vintages at the warehouse-chic Geelong Cellar Door; pan-seared barramundi with fresh green curry and rolled rice noodles at Baah Lah! Dining



On most nights it's just Anderson – a man of many talents, he also created all the bowls, plates and ceramic pieces in the restaurant – and one other accomplished chef rattling the pans. “It's small,” he says of the operation. “But one of the coolest

things we have is that everything you eat is either cooked by me or my other chef. Every dumpling made or every mushroom picked or every walnut cracked comes through our hands.”

It's a similar story near the waterfront, where local chef Matthew

Podbury, who's worked at Lyle's in London and Lyon's Café Sillon, has opened **La Cachette** (lacachette.com.au). Its prix-fixe menu of contemporary French dishes changes every three weeks. In mid-winter, choices included a rich, buttery entrée of roasted pumpkin with Portarlington mussels and Normandy cider, braised beef short rib with globe artichoke and harissa, and Jerusalem artichoke ice cream with dehydrated chocolate mousse and quince.

Almost as interesting as the food is that this is a family affair. Podbury is in the kitchen with his partner, Joanna Karlin, while his sister, Gemma, and father, Jeff, run the floor. It takes away the gamble of staffing a very small team. “I wanted to be in control, know what was going on, see the dining room and know who needed more attention and who didn't,” says Podbury, adding that the realities of a petite space – small fridge, less stock – allows him a type of freedom. “It allows us to be more intuitive and expressive, and cook to the seasons more.”



Igni's open kitchen



Assorted culinary highlights at The Arborist

Keeping a team together is also what allowed Jesse Hughes to expand. After opening popular South American eatery **Alma** (almarestaurant.com.au) four years ago, he recently launched **Felix** (felixgeelong.com.au), a modern European eatery in an elegant, pocket-sized space just off Little Malop Street. “One of the driving factors behind this restaurant was the timing worked really well,” says Hughes. “There was a really strong

team of five or six of us who started at Alma together but had worked together for between eight and 12 years – and had reached the ceiling of what we could achieve at Alma. It was time to expand and give those guys some opportunities.”

Now they’re creating an enticing menu that focuses on seafood and vegetables, so guests might choose fried-potato beignets with gruyère and cured yellow-fin tuna with

buttermilk, cucumber and radish. They’ve also recently partnered with a local producer to add Bellarine truffles to their ingredients. Regardless of the style of food they’re cooking, there’s one thing most of Geelong’s chefs agree upon. “There’s a real sense of community within the industry here,” says Hughes. It bodes well for the future, both for the restaurateurs and the locals and visitors who love their food.