

Fix St James, Sydney restaurant review

RESTAURANTS & REVIEWS FEATURE REVIEWS



FIX ST JAMES

111 Elizabeth St, Sydney, (02) 9232 2767, fixstjames.com.au

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Cards AE DC MC V EFT.

Open Breakfast and lunch Mon-Fri; dinner Tue-Wed 5.30pm-9pm, Thur-Fri 5.30pm-10pm.

Price Entrées \$18-\$20; mains \$26-\$42; desserts \$10-\$15.

Vegetarian Two antipasti.

Noise Noticeable.

Wheelchair access No.

Plus Gutsy, honest food and wine.

Minus Bus fumes.

A new fixation

Fix St James has become an oasis of good eating in the heart of the city, writes Pat Nourse, who finds himself seduced by its gutsy, honest food and wine.

Not every love hits you like a thunderbolt. Some of the great affairs sneak up on you, while others build as silently and as surely as a snowdrift. So it is with Fix St James. It's been a likable restaurant for a good while now, but it's one of those places that you find yourself all of a sudden commending left, right and centre and simply visiting a lot. The secret of its seduction: it serves good food and wine.

The restaurant's architecture is unremarkable, and its location, just past David Jones on Elizabeth Street, is notable chiefly for the vantage it grants of the 373, 301, 324 and rather a lot of other frequent bus services. The name of the design firm has been forgotten even by the owners and, if I may be perfectly frank, the menu's typefaces and lily pad logos are deeply troubling. When the restaurant first opened in late 2006 it had more of a conceptual story to tell, offering most dishes in three sizes, piccolo, medio and grande. It was an idea intended, I'm sure, to make it more flexible and fun for diners, but many of us (ahem) found it kind of irritating. The food was fine, and owner/sommelier Stuart Knox's dynamic wine list had much to commend it, but Fix was never really somewhere that sprang immediately to mind.

The appearance of a new chef in January 2009 saw things change. Nothing revolutionary at first, but the three-sizes-fit-all menu format was dumped in favour of the good-old entrées/mains/desserts three-course rumba. The new guy in the kitchen, Sam Bennett, had come from Glebe Point Diner, and brought with him some of that restaurant's no-nonsense gutsiness. The following Knox had for his idiosyncratic taste in wine grew, and somehow, at some time, somewhere along the line, something clicked. The introduction of two chef's choice menus, the Quick Fix and the Fix Me Up, saw the restaurant's popularity grow further. Now it buzzes with new life, and wine lovers and restaurant industry people vie with magazinistas, silks and fashion buyers for tables. It has quietly become an oasis of good eating in this part of the city.

The room seats 60 across a split-level space dominated by a bar which, by day, does a cracking trade in good coffee. The napkins are cloth, the tables are bare wood. The seating outside by the street is frequented by drinkers of lattes or Negronis and by anyone with a more than passing interest in Sydney's public transport system. Wherever you are, the blackboard is in plain sight. (It's writ so large, in fact, you can also make it out from the back of a passing cab, or indeed the X73 express to Coogee Beach.) It's Bennett's work, bold and slightly left of centre in both hand and deed. The fact that



items such as “duck liver goodness” are interspersed with the occasional diagram of a T-bone or fowl might give you some idea of where he’s coming from. Flavours are big – think roast duck for two with lentils in winter and snapper with a salad of chopped chilli and sorrel in summer – but never clumsy.

As at Glebe Point Diner, there’s plenty of movement on the menu, underpinned by a few stellar standards. Platters of Robert Marchetti’s salumi, for instance, are a huge hit with the after-work crowd, the salami, prosciutto and ossocollo sporting around olives, hunks of cheese and whopping grissini. Fried zucchini flowers run the entire length of the flower season (which seems to be pretty much year-round these days, no?), the crispness of the casing around a lemony mix of ricotta, parmesan and pecorino speaking of clean oil and judicious cooking. Finely shaved fennel, pecorino and grapes work equally well as an antipasto or a side.

Pasta, whether it’s sauced with anchovy and cauliflower or a rich pork ragù, is handled with aplomb. A sort of primavera of nutty, al dente orecchiette mixed with slivers of Roman beans, halved baby zucchini and coins of asparagus is bound with a loose pesto and given crunch with a fine scattering of toasted breadcrumbs.

Steak is another favourite, but it’s never a cop-out. The tagliata of Cape Grim Scotch, for instance, sees meaty slices concealed under a salad of big leaves and even bigger shards of parmesan, with hunks of crisp potatoes. It’s unusual, but it works. That particular dish has received no small amount of praise and has many a fan, but the flank might be a better choice still: thick fingers of well-marbled wagyu, meat with texture and flavour in serious quantities, laid next to good salty chips and strewn with buttery oyster mushrooms.

The chef’s choice menus are an especially good way to go with a group. The Quick Fix sees \$39 a head buying four antipasti of the kitchen’s choice then pasta to share, while the \$49 Fix Me Up is four small courses and then a main course, then a dessert to finish. You work your way through salumi, maybe some rectangles of raw tuna interleaved with basil leaves and covered with horseradish and radish, a salad of heirloom tomatoes, some quartered, some halved, tossed with micro-basil, torn mozzarella and Russino anchovies and a few other bits and pieces, and then hit something more substantial like a pork T-bone, a well-peppered, handsome cut with a white braise of fennel, cabbage, celery and garlic slivers and a mustardy potato salad. It’s one good dish followed by another.

Where the (mostly Australian) cheese selection is longish, the dessert list is short: there’s a torte, there are chocolate and pistachio truffles, there’s a barely set, almost lascivious vanilla panna cotta with grapes and a crisp caramel-coloured biscuit, and there’s something of a mainstay: a glass of watermelon and Campari granita topped with a dollop of rather firm mascarpone and a dusting of crushed candied mint.

Service on the whole is more café- or bar-like in its pace, but it’s not uninformed, and nor is it unpleasantly hasty. The promptness with which the plates issue from the kitchen is certainly a plus for the lunch crowd. Stuart Knox is all over it, pulling out a savoury red Beames de Venise here, pouring a Riedel or Spiegelau of a sprightly Wenzel furmint there. Food-friendly wines are his métier, and he likes to keep just enough happening in the list that his wine-nerd regulars always have something new to look forward to. He’s the everywhere man, dispensing dolcetto, Foscario and quips all over the room, punching out espressi and somehow maintaining a loyal and vocal following on Twitter all at once.

In speaking of Fix St James’s appeal, I hesitate to use the word “reliable”, lest it make it sound about as exciting as support hose or Swiss television, yet its dependability is a big part of what makes it great. They’re not trying to reinvent the wheel, but in sticking to their idea of good food and wine, Knox and Bennett, by dint of personality, go their own way nonetheless. Bennett’s style is developing in a way that makes you want to visit often to see what else he’s come up with, and Knox’s steady hand on the tiller (and the bottle-opener) keeps the sailing smooth. If this food be the music of love, to misquote the Bard, play on.

PHOTOGRAPHY **AMANDA MCLAUCHLAN**

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