

# Early fog, clearing



## Fog Prahran

Fashionable and glam, the food is solid, the service professional **14/20**

**Where:** 142 Greville Street, Prahran, 9521 3155  
**Food:** Contemporary with a few New Mexico accents  
**Cost:** Typical small dish \$15; typical main course \$28  
**Wine list:** Brief but "in touch", at very fair prices  
**Corkage:** \$10 a person  
**We drank:** 2005 Kooyong Massale Pinot Noir (Mornington Peninsula, Victoria) \$40  
**Service:** Snappy, helpful, pleasant  
**Value:** Variable  
**Owner:** Sam Frantzeskos  
**Chefs:** Jeremy Sutphin and Ryan Mann  
**Vegetarian:** Five entrees, two mains  
**Outdoors:** No  
**Wheelchairs:** No  
**Parking:** Street or paid  
**Cards:** AE BC DC MC V Eftpos  
**Hours:** Lunch midday-3pm, dinner 6pm-midnight, Tues-Sun; brunch from 10am Sat-Sun

**Scores:**  
**1-9:** Unacceptable, don't bother. **10-11:** Just OK, some shortcomings. **12:** Fair. **13:** Getting there. **14:** Recommended. **15:** Good. **16:** Really good. **17:** Truly excellent. **18:** An outstanding experience. **19-20:** Approaching perfection, Victoria's best.

**T**HERE was a time when it was important for the hapless critic to ascertain from a restaurant whether it had substantially different dinner and lunch menus before stumbling in to sniff the air. It seemed only reasonable to go when they thought they were serving their "best".

One of the many changes that has occurred in our dining rooms during the past 10 years has been the erosion of the two-carte policy. As a rule, what your smart, aspirational restaurant has on its lunch menu it almost certainly offers at dinner. It's a rule proven in the exception, which of course is Fog, a brand new glamourpuss on groovy Greville Street where Blu Pols once throbbed in the mid-'90s.

Sleek and sexy, all black gloss pillars and long shiny bar, black-stained timber floors and flashes of colour from the catwalk carpet and stunning red fibre orb light fittings, Fog is anything but cloudy. The two-level space has always made a good restaurant layout (there's also a fine courtyard at the side and, apparently, a sexy little bar out the back too); the street level for drinks and coffee, four steps up to the long dining area. Architects Wood Marsh don't do a lot of restaurants these days — the obvious references to me are Langton's and the Mansion Hotel at Werribee — but they've imbued this place with a contemporary glamour that undoubtedly comes out of the closet at night. It's not too bad during the day either but when the

## John Lethlean

surfs up, the formality is down: no white linen for the tables and a simpler, cheaper menu.

Which is not what we want. Faced with a scaled-down version of dinner, we negotiate with a willing and helpful waiter who checks with the kitchen as to what's available.

From the entree list, we want two things: achiote marinated quail brulee of sweet potato and sweet corn pico de gallo, whatever that is; and "Sashimi of Ahi Tuna Toasted Sesame, Red Onion, Jalapeno, Raw Soy", all random capitalisation and indiscriminate insertion of punctuation.

Fog's chef is from Albuquerque and I'm interested in what he brings from the US. His menu peppers familiar Med/Asian ideas with those from American kitchens: corn and vanilla soup with crab; maple vinaigrette with a little spinach and cheese salad; "tenderloin" (we know it as eye fillet centre cut) carpaccio; green tomato chutney with pork; Tabasco polenta croutons.

We can have the tuna, at \$19, but not the quail.

So-called ahi tuna is likely to be either bigeye or yellowfin. A most striking, delicate presentation, it features nine separate square tiles of exemplary, creamy-firm fish at the bottom of a slab-sided white

dish, gently wash in the light soy and a green oil I take to be connected to the thin slices of raw jalapeno at two corners of the spread. There are thin slices of red onion, white sesame seeds and, I think, a tiny splodge of wasabi at the centre of each jalapeno ring. I've never eaten at a Nobu but suspect this subtle merging of Japan and loosely South American flavours might be along the Matsuhisa line. I loved it, some might find the chilli's power out of whack.

The quail substitution is far more rustic: a big pile of black mussels steamed with vermouth and served with a greeny-yellow broth scattered with a green sauce with a distinctive lemon and coriander flavour (\$18). It is quite — refreshingly — different to the Italian flavour profiles you might typically expect of a green-herb based sauce in Melbourne. And the mussels are exemplary, the broth none-too-salty. With all this, we get good bread rolls, olive oil with red wine vinegar and unlimited tap water. I like bottled water but it's nice to have a waiter who doesn't automatically assume we're willing to pay for it.

Come mains, the butter-steamed barramundi is the choice we're having to sacrifice; no delivery yet, apparently. By Melbourne standards, the 12-choice list is long and features quite

a few ostensibly vegetarian dishes, with some interesting-sounding choices that mix and match their inspiration; ricotta salata here, sweet basil sauce there and a blackcurrant reduction elsewhere.

A good, pan-fried pork chop seasoned with smoked sweet paprika is served on a most unusual "white corn polenta" — it has a texture closer to porridge than creamy Italian polenta but is light and very enjoyable — some Swiss chard and a delightfully acidic green tomato and mustard seed pickle on top (\$26). While some of the entrees seemed expensive, this seemed cheap (and the Kooyong Massale pinot noir, at \$40, was great value too).

Conversely, a commercial green mix of leaves thrown into a salad bowl with a bit of cucumber and dressing — at \$8 — is lazy and avaricious. The menu needs refinement in this sense of up-and-down pricing.

At lunch, they offer a smaller 250 gram steak ("grilled top sirloin") than at dinner ("dry aged porterhouse"), and of lesser quality, although the naming is confusing: as I understand it, sirloin and porterhouse are interchangeable terms for cuts from the striploin, if we are to use Meat and Livestock Australia's guidelines.

Anyway, the dinner steak called a "300 gram porterhouse" — probably a striploin steak with bone removed (sometimes known as New York Cut) — is excellent meat,

well cooked with a little external charring and a dark glaze from a red-wine jus on the plate (\$37). There's a little softened rocket underneath as well as some golden-fried potato pieces and a bit of caramelised onion. It seemed a little pricey.

Finally, an individual — and good — tarte tatin (\$16) is served with three baby, honey-roasted apples, a splodge of caramel-like sauce and a very white vanilla ice-cream with a little sculpture of dehydrated apple discs wedged into it that inevitably sag. A really nice dessert, notwithstanding the unnecessary flamboyance of the sculpture.

A "creamy citrus soufflé" (\$17) is on an acid trip Ken Kesey might have approved of: not only is the actual pudding too tart, the cumquat compote it comes with simply compounds the problem. A lavender-infused Anglaise served in a stylish little separate pot helps but is in such a small portion as to be fairly meaningless. An idea needing refinement.

Run by a former nightclub entrepreneur returned from living in the US, Fog has all the right glassware, cutlery, etc. you'd expect in a snazzy new restaurant. The music's cool, the vibe is young and there's a definite — welcome — edge of cultural difference.

I'm definitely going back for a bit of after-hours glamour and to investigate more of chef Jeremy Sutphin's cookery. But I'll be going back at night.



Sashimi of ahi tuna.  
 PICTURES: GARY MEDLICOTT