

Can't snag a table at the new Restaurant of the Year? Stroll into the (fancy) bar instead



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Highlight: The new three-hat home for chef Josh Niland's fish cookery includes a walk-in bar serving seafood-led snacks such as swordfish empanada and curry fish pie.

Body

This is a bar, but it isn't your ordinary, everyday bar, because this isn't your ordinary, everyday pub. What was the Grand National became Saint Peter at the Grand National in August - home to the fish cookery of Josh Niland and [newly awarded three hats in the 2025 Good Food Guide](#).

In the next-door restaurant - luxe, comfortable, warmly serviced - it's all about the seven-course set menu for \$275 a head. Dish after dish is immaculate, precise and surprisingly classic until it sinks in that the meaty charcuterie, silken noodles and beefy wellington are all, in fact, fish - every part of the fish - and your mind is blown.

[Link to Image](#)

James Brickwood

But this is a bar, and nobody wants their minds blown in a bar. They want a deliciously cold and oily oyster **shell** martini (\$25) while waiting for their restaurant booking, or they want to wander in off the street and see what all the fuss is about over a Resch's and a cheeseburger (\$25). Never mind that the patty is made with aged yellowfin tuna and the bacon is cured swordfish belly; it's still a cheeseburger.

The corner bar frames eucalypts and Paddo renos through large windows, with rippled glass doors leading to a private dining room. Studio Aquilo worked with the Nilands to create the space and flow, with sought-after booths, high and low tables and paint-scumbled walls the texture of oyster shells. Add a large bar of magnificently streaked marble and it feels like a seascape.

Niland is militant about the menu just being "snacks" because he doesn't want to cannibalise the restaurant offering. It begins with "preserves" of fish and shellfish, cured or pickled and kept under **oil**, accompanied by good bread and oyster shells of butter. Yamba sardines under smoked **oil** (\$24) are a slippery, oily stairway to heaven, and Abrolhos scallops under bull kelp **oil** (\$26) taste remarkably buttery, sweet and nutty. Even preserved, they feel fresh and lively.

[Link to Image](#)

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There's an oyster list, which should be leapt upon. Tonight, they are from Merimbula Lakes, Merimbula Sapphire and Pambula (\$8 each). Niland stores them at 12 degrees, which keeps them in such good nick they bring a breath of salty sea breeze with them.

Each is markedly different, the Sapphire particularly minerally, with the umami of seaweed. Local ceramicist Claudia Lau even uses oyster shell in the clay for the shell-shaped platter.

There's something ceremonial about this food. Empanadas of Mooloolaba swordfish (\$14 each) are dramatically borne to the table on a bed of spiky, bleached fish vertebrae as if they are the overlords of the sea. The stuffing is intense, the pastry richly bubbled.

After that, I'm expecting a brass band for the curried fish pie (\$40). A small, deep pot is topped with strong, deeply glazed, pastry sealing in a silky veloute enriched with vadouvan curry spice mix, onions and roasted garlic, liberally studded with chunks of line-caught Busselton bar cod. A green salad on the side is the perfect foil.

[Link to Image](#)

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Wine service is responsive, and wines are often coastal and saline, able to put up a fight against what can be intensely flavoured food. Niland is not doing fish and chips (before you ask), because giving people what they want is not the point. Everything here plays a supporting role to the philosophy of the restaurant. The popular, strongly battered, salt-and-pepperberry Corner Inlet calamari (\$32), for instance, uses unwanted tentacles and trimmings. If there's a no-show in the restaurant, four crumbed garfish might pop up on the bar menu.

Dessert (\$18) is small and chic, an homage to Arnott's mint slice, with Jivara chocolate cremeux set with fish gelatine and topped with native mint and chocolate ganache, mint chocolate sorbet and a crisp cocoa tuile.

With the discipline, high principles, warm service and depth of flavour and meaning built into every dish, it's a stretch to think of this as a bar. It's more of a bar raised.

The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide 2025, featuring more than 450 reviews, is on sale for \$14.95 from newsagents, supermarkets and at [thestore.com.au](https://www.thestore.com.au). The new Good Food app is now available to download, featuring Good Food Guide reviews, recipes and food news. It's available as a standalone subscription and as part of Nine's Premium Digital packages for subscribers of The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.

Graphic

Swordfish empanada.

Abrolhos scallops in bull kelp oil, served with bread and cultured butter orbs.

Curried fish pie.

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