



Fish master tops the scale

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Body

Josh Niland's flagship fine diner is a very big deal, but don't fret if you can't get in. Here's the best kept secret, bar none

Sydney restaurant titan Josh Niland has been riding the wave of success these past months. He launched his first overseas restaurant in November. He netted a spot in the World's 50 Best Restaurants long list in May.

And now, the pearl in the crown - the opening of his flagship fine diner Saint Peter at the Grand National Hotel in Paddington this month.

More than just a relocation, Saint Peter at The Grand National has grown from a guppy on Oxford St to a seriously big fish, doubling in footprint, with a new first-class offering that's as good as anywhere in the world.

A slick new fit-out by Sydney-based designer Studio Aquilo features fine fishbone tiled walls and curved booth seating in soft mollusc shades. A half-**shell** table at the front of the room is faced towards the open kitchen, offering an exclusive opportunity to watch the fish master at work. Coming soon, 14-boutique hotel rooms will offer a luxurious place for guests to flop after their feast.

Now's about the time in the review that we need to confess that we didn't actually dine at the restaurant.

Not only was it booked out, but it was also very expensive (see: \$275 a person). Instead, we dined at the bar - and we're convinced it's the best-kept secret in town.

It may be called the Saint Peter Bar but by Sydney standards, it is most definitely a restaurant. The size of the space is comparable to the main dining room, set out with stand-alone tables and chairs as well as booth seating for larger groups.

The food menu is not just for nibbling. An expanded selection of small and large plates can easily accommodate a shared feast or three-course affair.

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The backbone of the bar menu is a study of rock oysters sourced from up and down the coast, splashed with fresh garnishes and dressings from wakame seaweed to sweet, salty melon. Sardines also make an appearance. Niland bins the tin for fresh, silvery fillets, sourced from Yamba fisherman Keith Kerr. The herrings are smoked on ironbark and preserved in native thyme oil, which is so fruity and herbaceous you'll want to soak up every ounce. Doorstops of sourdough get the job done, along with a shimmering butter pearl, served in an open oyster shell.

The catch of the menu, however, is the curried fish pie, made with line-caught hapuka from Revolution Fisheries. The sweet, delicate flakes are tangled with seaweed in a creamy, fenugreek-spiced vadouvan curry. The dish is modelled on a lamb shank pot pie, complete with buttery pastry lid, and fish vertebrae poking out of the top. The dish pays tribute to the hotel's former life as a pub, as does the cumberland fish sausages and the chubby potato chip stubs.

For dessert, a slab of valrhona chocolate is rippled with crispy, crunchy puffs made from leftover fish scales. Snap off a piece and pass it around.

And because this is actually a bar - apparently - you can also order a very fine oyster shell martini infused with long spine sea urchin. Perfect for toasting your decision to dine at the bar.

Saint Peter Bar 61 Underwood St, Paddington saintpeter.com.au/bar No bookings needed

Open Tue-Wed 5pm-late, Thu-Sat noon-4pm, 5pm-late, Sun noon-4pm

Verdict Food * * * * * Value * * * * * Ambience * * * * * Value * * * * * Overall * * * * * delicious.com.au/eatout

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