

Not just here to grill steaks: This 'proper restaurant' offers bells-and-whistles dining



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Highlight: With a new winter menu and head chef fresh from Oncore by Clare Smyth and Newtown's Cafe Paci, **Shell** House has plenty of compelling reasons to visit.

Body

Here's what I like about **Shell** House: it feels like a proper restaurant. Small praise, you might say, but these days proper restaurants - real restaurants - seem less common than a decade ago.

Reading a "hot new places to try this weekend" list can feel like scrolling through the Netflix home page without an agenda. There are projects created with care and a point of view, but there's a growing amount of dross born from what marketers think we want to consume. For a streaming service, this stuff exists to keep the content coffers full. In hospitality, it adds investor value to a new "lifestyle" precinct or high-rise development. Claims of cultural value should be treated with suspicion.

I certainly treated **Shell** House with suspicion when it opened near Wynyard Station in late 2021. A highly manicured venue - all marble, metal and dark wood - in a heritage commercial palazzo site that reportedly cost \$14 million to renovate. Hmm. That's the kind of outlay that leads CBD operators to offer "elevated" pub standards, keeping costs down and prices up.

But when **Shell** House owner Brett Robinson lured Aria's executive chef, Joel Bickford, to come on board as culinary director across the venue's three bars, restaurant and rooftop terrace, it was a head-turning move that said, "We're not just here to grill steaks."

Aaron Ward - second-in-charge at Stanmore's three-hatted Sixpenny - was appointed to helm the glitzy dining room's kitchen and his opening menu was a humdinger. Ambitious scope executed with quiet elegance.

It felt like **Shell** House Dining Room & Terrace would be around for the long haul until - record scratch - Ward left late last year. Bathers' Pavilion in Mosman made an offer he couldn't refuse.

In March, **Shell** House announced its new head chef would be a bloke named Brad Guest, fresh from senior roles at Oncore by Clare Smyth and Newtown's Cafe Paci. He must have settled in all right because when I visited recently for a Saturday lunch, Bickford was nowhere to be seen.

New head chef Brad Guest would like you to know that he's not here simply to grill steaks, either.

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At its core, the top level of **Shell** House is a spring and summer restaurant - a place for oysters and chardonnay and liberal squeezes of lemon over whole fish. But the new winter menu listed too many things I wanted to eat right now, so a booking was made; who needs asparagus season when there's steamed quince pudding dolloped with clotted cream?

Across a vast carte of snacks, starters, pastas, shellfish, coal-roasted meats and vegetable-focused mains, Guest would like you to know that he's not here simply to grill steaks, either. That said, there are four of them, ranging from a \$48 hanger to a \$220 slab of retired dairy cow on the bone, and each one will do the job if you want to get stuck into the triple-digit reds.

Meanwhile, five thick slices of molasses-glazed lamb belly (\$68) are precision-rendered and on hand for all your mid-August shiraz needs.

[Link to Image](#)

Jennifer Soo

Squid ink-black lobster agnolotti pasta (\$74) comes out as a squad of eight parcels that would make fine pillows for a family of fat mice. It's beautifully long-flavoured - unmistakably lobster - topped with tiny curls of squid and a well-behaved Geraldton wax **oil**.

Just-tender abalone (\$34) is threaded with shiitake and supercharged with chicken fat; roasted hunks of Jerusalem artichoke (\$38) are teamed with the white balsamic tartness of agrodolce sauce, golden raisins and potent taleggio cheese. A confident swing that doesn't miss.

Now here's what I don't like quite as much. The mild sweetness of cobia (\$38), served sashimi-style, is blunted by a bottom layer of cream, and the dish's advertised inclusion of horseradish is undetectable.

[Link to Image](#)

Jennifer Soo

That quince pudding (\$26) is a crumb closer to something from Sara Lee than the Dickensian ideal I was hoping for.

I could also whinge about some of the prices (\$65 for a mud crab tart? Thirty-eight dollars for a Tanqueray No. Ten gin martini?), but at least there are options.

If you want to pop in for a quick dinner in the hands of well-rehearsed floor staff who take hospitality seriously, it might look like the butter-forward risotto topped with five sweet and crunchy spot prawns (\$38) or the juicy spatchcock boldly flavoured with romesco and smoked garlic (\$60; it can and should be shared).

Maybe put an \$18 glass of Jim Barry 2023 Assyrτικο on the final bill, too. Head wine guy Eduardo Fritis-Lamora, or someone from his team of six sommeliers, will present the bottle to the table, no matter your order. It's the kind of proper service it would be nice to see more of.

This review was originally published in [Good Weekend](#) magazine

Graphic

Go-to dish: Lobster agnolotti.

Steamed quince pudding.

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