



## *New Botanic is wild at heart*

The Advertiser (Australia)

September 14, 2024 Saturday

SAWeekend Edition

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**Section:** NEWS; Pg. 26

**Length:** 1347 words

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### **Body**

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The restaurant at the heart of the Botanic Garden has been declared the best in Australia. But can the young chef with a passion for native ingredients who is now in charge keep it at the pinnacle?

The tart is gone in a few seconds. A mouthful, perhaps two.

But behind that fleeting moment are the countless hours spent turning a vague idea into something that can be brought to life in Restaurant Botanic's kitchen.

It starts with the challenge of fashioning an impossibly fragile *shell* based on celeriac that is blended to a paste with a mix of sugars, moulded and fried, so it shatters like the finest crystal.

At the tart's base is kangaroo loin, cured with juniper, cold smoked, and finely diced, then dressed with a vinaigrette of paperbark *oil* and a kangaroo "garum" that has been fermented for at least two months.

Blanketing the roo is a velvety celeriac cream decorated with a garland of rosemary blossoms. And, finally, at the table, a waiter tops all of this with a spoonful of Oscietre caviar taken from older sturgeon fish because the eggs grow to be larger. Yes, the tart is only a mouthful, but the pleasure it delivers comes in waves: the disintegrating *shell*, momentary lushness of the cream, the tongue-pleasing texture of the meat and, finally, the lingering luxury of the eggs.

This is the kind of complexity, repeated again and again through 20-plus courses, that has come to be expected at Botanic. It's the reason the restaurant was named the number one dining experience, not just in this state but the whole of Australia. And it's the reason that the price of food alone is somewhere north of \$300.

In the three years the Botanic has made this extraordinary ascent, its reputation has been inextricably linked to Justin James, an American with a star-spangled CV that includes Eleven Madison Park and Noma, among others. More than just a chef, he was the inventor, designer, manager, advocate and guardian of his vision.

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That all changed in April with the announcement, seemingly from nowhere, that James would be leaving. Now, after a short break, the Botanic has reopened with someone new to chart the creative direction. His challenge: only the simple task of maintaining the standard of a restaurant at the very pinnacle.

Jamie Musgrave, however, is familiar with these expectations. He has been part of the Botanic team since James arrived and last year was appointed second-in-charge.

Raised in Margaret River, he started cooking at an early age and, while not yet 30, had experience across kitchens in Perth, Sydney and Hong Kong before landing here.

Early in his career, while still training, he began exploring the forests and scrub around his home and elsewhere in the state with an expert in foraging who introduced him to the local First Nations people. The experience was clearly formative and, while some bush foods were already in play at the Botanic, they are now more obvious. Musgrave wants us to move beyond the boundary of the orderly garden to somewhere wilder.

Outside the shift in the kitchen, not much has changed. Full payment is still required at the time of booking, like a theatre ticket. The revamped rotunda dining room continues to age gracefully and the arrangements of dried flora spread across the room (and even in the entry to the toilet) are wonderful.

The service team, while ultra-professional, could loosen up a bit and dispense with the heavily scripted monologues, particularly the initial introduction. Best let the food speak for itself. Here is just a sample.

The starting point is a reminder of your walk through the garden, expressed in a nourishing tea of mushrooms steeped with plane tree leaves and bunya branches, alongside a nasturtium flower crisp and leaf emulsion. Later, a Davidson plum tree is pointed out just through the window as a wedge of the fruit is presented with the flesh replaced by a jelly (please don't try to eat the skin as we did).

These culinary horizons quickly broaden. The Botanic has always pushed to source the best and most unusual of ingredients, wherever they happen to be found around the country.

Turban snail, then, has come all the way from an island off the coast of Newcastle, the meat braised for 12 hours until supple, barbecued and served back in the shell on a lovely gazpacho of sea parsley, succulents and macadamia. Superb urchin roe from Tasmania is laid on a butter-fried wattleseed brioche with desert lime and ice plant salsa. Darwin mud crab is the catalyst for a version of Japanese chawanmushi, the shells used in making a dashi stock for the custard, the picked meat warmed with compound butter, and a crab-based foam covering the top as if washed up on the crest of a wave.

Other ingredients are presented as double acts. The kangaroo tart is accompanied by skewers of grilled roo smeared in a macadamia mole (sauce). Calamari comes as a crowd-pleasing taco of fried tentacles, yellow pepper paste and saltbush salad in a tortilla where the lard has been replaced by, wait for it, crocodile fat. The other squid dish is more cerebral with shaved sheets of tube cured in kombu, fermented with bunya, rolled up with sunrise lime, then arranged at the centre of a pool of squid consommé. These delicate, ethereal flavours risk being talked over by some of the more extroverted native elements, particularly when filaments of Geraldton wax leaf make an appearance.

Marron, always a Botanic highlight, has similar issues this time round. A redgum-roasted tail looks exquisite but the anticipated pleasure of that sweet, smoky flesh is diminished beneath a barrage of other citrusy flavours, led by lemon myrtle and its signature lollyshop lemon quality.

Flat fillet of emu, taken from below the rump, fares far better. Wrapped in paperbark with a smear of mountain pepper, it is toasted directly on the embers before being hung above the fire to smoke gently. The parcel is unwrapped at the table before being taken away to plate up with wilted warrigal leaves and a fermented onion and truffle sauce that you'd swear contained at least a touch of meaty jus. More truffle, from WA, has been shaved on top to accentuate the emu's dark, savoury notes.

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Sweet courses continue the bush adventure. The sharpness of rainforest cherry, in poached and sorbet form, serves as a palate cleanser. Flinders Ranges quandong also has two iterations, as fruit jelly and granita, laid over a dollop of smoked birch wood cream. The more pronounced smoke of a paperbark and white chocolate mousse is hard to get past, unfortunately, in a combination with cubes of strawberry gum jelly and fried macadamia cake that might otherwise have been a loose play on a trifle. Along the way, many of the plates have been embellished with the leaves, flowers, fronds and even a cross-section of cone collected from the garden. For the petit fours, however, this is taken to another level, with an arrangement that looks like it was put together by a professional florist. Camouflaged brilliantly in this backdrop are hidden treats of macadamia chocolate, Davidson plum craquelin and, most memorably, a tart of grilled riberry and elderflower cream. Like everything else, it is incredibly detailed, creative and has clearly taken a load of hard yakka.

Is Restaurant Botanic as good as previous visits? Probably not. The ride isn't as smooth, the high points more elusive.

But Musgrave has done an extraordinary job given the gulf in experience when compared to his predecessor, as well as the short lead time in preparing his first menu.

A little less exuberance, a greater sense of balance, and things are only going to get better.

Restaurant Botanic Adelaide Botanic Garden, Plane Tree Dr, Adelaide 8223 3526 [restaurantbotanic.com.au](http://restaurantbotanic.com.au) Set menu \$315 paid on booking Open Lunch Sun Dinner Thu-Sat Must try Red kangaroo, celeriac, Oscietre caviar; mountain pepper spiced emu fillet Verdict Food 16.5/20 Ambience 17/20 Service 15/20 Value 14/20 Overall 16.5/20

As a guide, scores indicate: 1-9 Fail; 10-11 Satisfactory; 12-14 Recommended; 15-16 Very Good; 17-18 Outstanding; 19-20 World Class [delicious.com.au/eatout](http://delicious.com.au/eatout)

**Load-Date:** September 13, 2024

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