

What's on the menu for 2012

Book now for Sydney's hottest restaurants, chefs and trends, writes **Simon Thomsen**

IT'S been a year of dudes and downsizing, big openings and equally big closings. Only the mining industry seems to rival the Sydney restaurant scene for success, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics recording strong growth in 2011, although the closure of leading chef Tony Bilson's restaurants demonstrates that while we're keen to eat out, restaurateurs aren't necessarily raking it in. While it seems every second building in Surry Hills is now a restaurant – the inner-city suburb welcomed a new dining spot almost every week – Sydney's CBD is also a very popular place to eat out, especially at the revamped Westfield Sydney.

Here is taste.com.au's snapshot of the past 12 months in Sydney dining and our predictions for what you'll be eating next year.

DUDE, WHERE'S MY DINNER?

EVERYWHERE you look, it's dude food: burgers, hot dogs, ribs, tacos, nachos, buffalo wings and fried chicken. The genius of this trend is

repackaging the kind of dishes serious chefs normally (and perhaps rightly) sneer at as trash as something cool, then charging five times more than you'd normally pay for it at a fast-food drive-through.

Dude food is the sum of many parts and it's the burger craze that rules the menus. Justin North led the way, opening a second **Charlie & Co** burger joint next to the Opera House. It seemed every top Sydney chef was flipping patties and charging \$20. Being competitive, several got together to decide whose was best. Neil Perry, of **Rockpool Bar & Grill**, won. Even Jarryd Faint, a 20-year-old chef who opened **Restaurant 22** in Windsor in mid-2011, offers an angus beef burger on a toasted brioche bun.

The next step was shrinking.

Guide's food for thought

MORE than 700 restaurants, cafes, bistros and bars made the grade in the new *Eating And Drinking Sydney 2012* guide, which will be a boon for foodies wanting to explore this fabulous city.

It's a guide to dining out on everything from ethnic cuisines in the suburbs to the hit new CBD restaurants. And it's not about stars or hats or ratings, it's about exploring old favourites, newcomers, hidden gems, trendy bars and quirky cafes.

Top food writers fanned out covering 11 regions, then divided into restaurants, cheap eats and bar categories. There's also an index on different cuisines, so if Italian takes your fancy, there is an easy reference. *Eating And Drinking*



Sydney also compiled Top 5 and Top 10 lists with suggestions for specific occasions and experiences. Exclusive taste.com.au discount offer: Get 35 per cent off the \$29.95 RRP of *Eating and Drinking Sydney*. That's a saving of over \$10! Go to taste.com.au for more details, plus great reviews from the book.

with American sliders (mini burgers), whether it's Dan Hong's Vietnamese-style mini banh mi at **Ms G's** or the calamari slider at the tapas-style pub **The Carrington** in Surry Hills.

So what's next? Well, **Rockpool Bar & Grill** now serves hot dogs, including one using house-made chorizo. **The Dip** in Chinatown is another hot dog destination. Upstairs at **Porteno's Gardel's Bar**, they combined two trends in a hot dog slider. Don't be surprised when another American staple appears on menus near you.

OLE AMIGOS

ATTENTION turned from Spanish tapas to Mexican tacos with mixed results that at least improved on pub nachos.

While **Guzman y Gomez** taquerias are strewn, like empty tequila bottles, across Sydney, the top perro (dog) is **Mexicano** in Narrabeen, followed by the gangster chic of **El Capo** in Surry Hills and **Barrio Chino** in Kings Cross.

It will continue with South American flavours as may caliente (very hot) in 2012.



Local produce: A cured meats plate from The Union restaurant at Penrith. Picture: John Fotiadis

Peruvian newcomer **Moreno** in Surry Hills is just the start.

THE SMORGASBORD

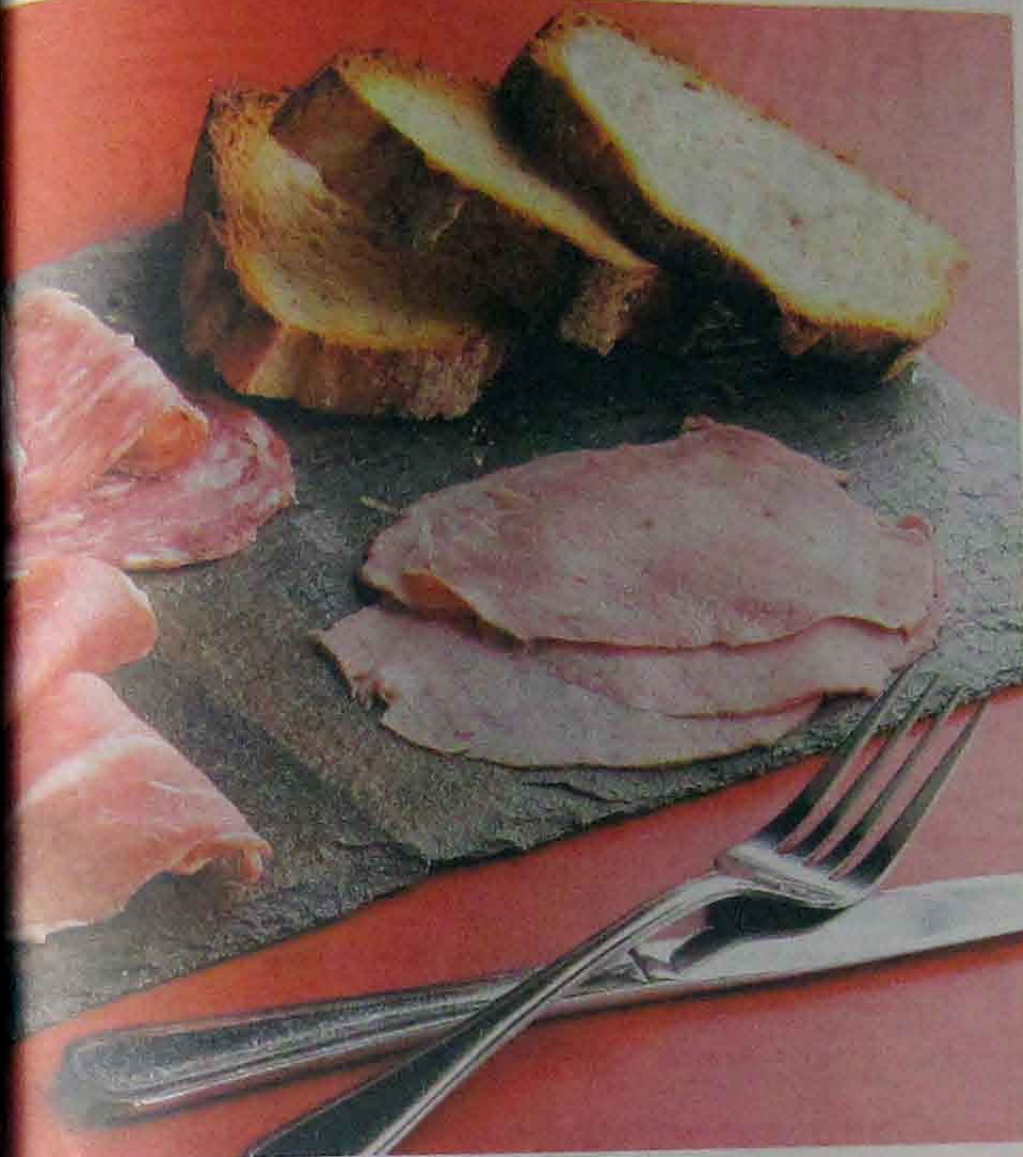
NO, not the Swedish buffet, but restaurant clusters in shopping centres, the casino and even new residential developments, such as the Candelapas building in Waterloo St, Surry Hills, home to the excellent **Orto Trading Co**, **Izakaya Fujiyama** and **El Capo**. It seems the restaurant mix is more important to a redevelopment than parking spaces.

Westfield Sydney is the standout, headlined by chef Justin North's empire, alongside a great mix of everyday eating. The Star casino redevelopment put the house on two Asian-Americans. New Yorker David Chang's 30-seat **Momofuku Seiobo** is the hottest ticket in town, while former Nobu chef Chase Kojima's modern Japanese restaurant, **Sokyo**, is equally classy. Also worth a visit is Chatwood's Eat Street, a mix of several Asian street food ventures, plus a Bavarian beer cafe and the modern pizzazz of **Rocket** restaurant.

REHEAT AND SERVE

NOT content with just one restaurant, chefs these days are all about empire expansion. Local produce champion Ross Dobson added a funky tapas bar, **The Union**, to his other Penrith digs, **Cafe at Lewers**.

Vietnamese institution **Bau Truong** headed east with a third, more formal branch in Marrickville, while Thai chef Sujet Saenkham's third **Spice I Am** opened in Balmain. Justin North now runs three restau-



rants – **Becasse**, **Etch** and **Quarter 21** – two burger joints and a bakery. Alessandro Pavoni of **Ormezzio** at The Spit paid homage to his Lombardian heritage with **Spiedo** at Westfield Sydney. Neil Perry crossed the island to Perth for a third **Rockpool Bar and Grill**, as well as repeating **Spice Temple's** success in Melbourne. **Provedore** Barry McDonald opened his fourth **Fratelli Fresh and Sopra** cafe in Sydney's CBD this month, while precocious chef Dan Hong tried his hand at Mexican at **El Loco** in Surry Hills, following **Lotus** and new Potts Point Asian, **Ms G's**.

HOT IN THE HOOD

YEAH, yeah, yeah, Surry Hills this and that, but there are some pretty strong performers producing great neighbourhood restaurants too, from the exuberant Greek of Kogarah's **Parea** to **Three Fish Seafood Grill** in Cronulla, the affordable contemporary cooking of Wayne Borgese-Coom at **Booth St Bistro** in Annandale, the regional Malaysian of **Jacqui M** in Concord, the charming **Woods Cafe and Deli** in Earlwood, the

Neighbourly: Scallops with black pudding from **Omage Restaurant** at **Baulkham Hills**. Picture: John Fotiadis

revamped **Inside Out** in Parramatta and the excellent **Omage** in Baulkham Hills.

I'LL HAVE WHAT THEY'VE HAVING

IS THERE a groupthink in chefland? How do ingredients and affectations spread like contagious diseases through kitchens? Is your food dusted with fennel pollen? Rocket flowers scattered across the plate? Is the menu written like a shopping list? Is it cooked over a wood-fired grill?

You know they serve several different steaks. With super grains such as quinoa and amaranth. And pour some sriracha chilli sauce over it. Or the kewpie mayo from Japan. Did you know the fish is sustainably harvested?

Have you tried the Argentinian wines? They're all from an organic winemaker, you know. Try the vegetables from the kitchen garden. The rest are foraged on the way to work. They'll serve it on slate or wooden boards. Do you like our restaurant's Nordic fitout? I'll drink to that.

YOUR NEXT COURSE

IN THE coming 12 months, expect more street food, especially with Sydney City Council trialling late night food trucks over summer (use social media to find them). With Ferran Adria's molecular gastronomy reign over, grills will continue to prosper as chefs get back to basics and traditional techniques. As a result, watch out for lamb becoming as specialised as beef, with names such as **Matt Moran's Moran Family Lamb**, as well as citing the breed, feed regimen and region.

After cult Swedish chef Magnus Nilsson's Sydney visit and with Denmark's **Noma** as world top restaurant, Scandinavian food will rival **ABBA**, **Shogun** novels, **Princess Mary**, **Volvos** and vodka for our affections. We hope you like herrings.

The push towards the fresher, lighter food perhaps to make up for all the dude excesses will continue to thrive alongside a more casual approach to eating out.

WATCH OUT FOR

MATT Moran will reopen the legendary **Pruniers** in Woollahra as **Chiswick Gardens** – which will have its own kitchen garden – in May 2012. The Icebergs team have opened **Neild Avenue**, a Mediterranean bar and grill, in Rushcutters Bay. Young guns **Daniel Puskas** and **James Parry**, previously of **Newtown's Oscillate Wildly**, open **Sixpenny** in Petersham in December.



Dude food: Justin North dishes up burgers at **Charlie & Co**. Picture: Bob Barker

