

# EATING

Melbourne is one of the world's great food cities. While it doesn't have the deeply ingrained traditions and profound self-confidence of, say, Paris, Rome, Bangkok or Tokyo, it has an open, genuine exuberance about food and cooking and a talent for innovation and adaptation. It's a thrilling city for anyone who lives to eat. It shares with Sydney the Modern Australian cooking style (Mod Oz to its mates), a loose term that describes a mix of European and Asian or Middle Eastern techniques and ingredients, with a seasonal, produce-driven philosophy similar to Californian cuisine. It can also be used to describe a more straightforward adoption of dishes or ingredients from various cultures that have appeared on menus and in home kitchens; toasted pide, avocado and vegemite, anyone? This hybrid way of eating has gathered its influences from the migrants that make up the city's population. Melbourne's version of Mod Oz, and the city's culinary offerings in general, tend slightly more towards European and Mediterranean traditions, rather than Sydney's firmly Pacific Rim take. This is both a product of the city's very untropical climate, with four distinct seasons, and also perhaps due to the stronger impact Melbourne's Italian, Greek and Middle Eastern communities made on the city during the 1960s and 70s. That's not to say that you won't find wonderful Asian cooking and a host of varied Asian influences here. There's a particularly vibrant Vietnamese restaurant scene and an increasing breadth of Chinese cuisines available too.

Chefs in Melbourne aren't *exactly* celebs in the Ramsey/Roubouchon/Batali mould, with multiple franchises and massive marketing budgets, but they do enjoy a very high profile. Melburnians gobble up the Age's food supplement 'Epicure' every Tuesday to keep up with who's doing what in which restaurant kitchen. They watched with an air of polite disdain as the Crown Casino (p62) imported several stellar Sydney chefs (and one international franchise, Nobu; see p134) but in the name of a good feed, have embraced these as well.

The **Melbourne Food & Wine Festival** (see p13) in March is a highlight for gourmets and greedy amateurs alike; the city's best restaurants offer fixed-price lunches for a steal. As well as 'Epicure', the Age newspaper publishes the annual *Good Food Guide* and its companion *Cheap Eats*. Many of the restaurant reviews can be found on the newspaper's website ([www.theage.com.au](http://www.theage.com.au)); its coverage reaches further into the suburbs than this chapter can.

## HISTORY & CULTURE

The site of Melbourne was seen as a very special place to live long before John Batman set eyes on the natural falls of the Yarra. The Wurunjeri thrived because of the area's incredible bounty; the wetlands that spread south of the Yarra were teeming with life, and the Yarra itself brimmed with fish, eels and shellfish. Depending on the season, indigenous 'Melburnians' would have eaten roast kangaroo, waterfowl, fish and eel, as well as greens, grubs, yam daisies and sweet cordial concocted from banksia blossoms. The first Europeans didn't stop to notice the prelapsarian supermarket they had stumbled upon, instead rather quickly going about planting European crops and tending large flocks of sheep. Although many new arrivals were asstounded by the ready supply of fresh food (especially the Irish, who were escaping the famine of the 1840s), the early settlers dined mainly on mutton, bread and butter, tea, beer

and rum. But it's hard to imagine that a few of them familiar with the gentle art of poaching didn't dine on ducks and geese. A recent archaeological dig in Little Lonsdale St area of the city revealed bones, seeds and shells that suggest, by the later part of the 19th century at least, Melburnians diets were, in fact, pretty diverse. Fine cuts of meat, fresh fruits and vegetables graced their tables. Seafood was also a staple, and oysters were not considered a luxury.

Melbourne has always been a multicultural city, but apart from the long-standing influence of the Chinese community, food tastes didn't really begin to shift from the Anglo-Celtic basics until the 1950s, when there was a large influx of Eastern European and southern Mediterranean migrants. As well as importing the goods they couldn't do without, such as olives, they set to producing cheeses, sausages and small goods that gradually found their way from specialist delis into mainstream supermarkets.

As far as restaurant culture goes, the dominance of the pub and the local 'Chinese' also began to be challenged in the 1950s. The 1956 Olympics organisers imported European chefs to help with catering, many of whom chose to stay on long after the athletes had gone home. Immigrants Georges and Mirka Mora opened their seminal restaurant at this time too. The Vietnamese, Lebanese and Turkish migrants that came to Melbourne in the 1970s have also had a lasting impact on the city's food culture. These days, rice-paper rolls, falafel and flat breads are more common on school 'tuckshop' menus than meat pies.

The last 10 years have seen an increasing interest in organic produce and provenance. Many Melburnians often shop at markets for locally grown or produced specialties, and at ethnic grocers and markets for imported spices and other ingredients. The Slow Food movement has a strong presence state-wide and there's a monthly Slow Food Market (p73), which joins a host of other farmers markets in Melbourne and around the state. Famed chef and writer Stephanie Alexander has developed a kitchen garden and cooking curriculum at an inner-city school that aims to instil a love of fresh produce and the culinary arts in a new generation. The program is set to be rolled out to other schools. What might be considered 'gourmet' in many other places, is just keeping it real in Melbourne.

## HOW MELBOURNE EATS

Many Melburnians have grown up with at least one other culinary culture besides the rather grim Anglo-Australian fare of the mid-20th century; they are also inveterate travellers. This makes for a city of adventurous, if often highly critical, palates. Melbourne's food scene is one of almost limitless choice; there is a constant flow of new ideas, new places and reinvention.

At the top end of the food chain, fine diners thrive. You'll find menus rove across regions rather than slavishly following the posh Anglo-French model. There are those that closely follow a contemporary French direction, such as *Vue du Monde* (p128) but you're more likely to see a thoughtful pan-Mediterranean menu, like that of the *Botanical* (p141). Others incorporate Asian ideas and flavours in what is often termed *Mod Oz*: Andrew McConnell at his legendary Carlton restaurant *Three, One, Two* (at time of writing relocating to Gertrude

St, Fitzroy with a name change) and at *Circa* at the Prince (p139), *Fed Square's Taxi* (p129), *Ezard* at Adelphi (p128) and *Richmond's Pearl* (p134) to name a few. Upmarket Italian is done well: old school at *Grossi Florentino Grill* (p129) or casual at *Becco* (p129). Eastern Mediterranean is done with five-star flair at *Greg Malouf's Momo* (due to open in late 2008; see [www.momorestaurant.com.au](http://www.momorestaurant.com.au)) or *Maha* (p130). The *Press Club* (p129) and *Mini* (p129) champion *Mod Greek* dining. While many Melbourne chefs experiment widely, mixing and matching technique and ingredient, you'll rarely find chefs doing fusion for fusion sake. There's too much respect for providence and context.

Given that there's so much to try, Melburnians love to eat out often. The city really shines when it comes to a more informal, grazing style of dining and you'll find that quality produce and attention to detail don't flag. Small and large plates override the standard three course chronology, flavours sing and everyone digs in. Bar food is no longer seen as a mere consort to booze, nowadays it's an equal marriage of tastes and experiences. It's something that locals love to do, but it's also a great way for visitors to taste some of the city's best cooking without the credit-card king-hit of a fine dining dinner. Pub grub is also popular, and ranges from what constitutes full-blown restaurants in a pub environment to a basic counter-meal service with heartily nostalgic dishes such as bangers and mash, steaks, roasts and the ubiquitous multicultural chimera, the chicken parma (a flattened chicken breast served in loose appropriation of the Sicilian *parmigiana* style).

There's also no shortage of *really* casual food that's done with the love and attention and is great value for money. A steaming bowl of pho, a square of spanakopita, a teriyaki salmon inari or a provolone and prosciutto piadina will probably leave you change from a tenner, but not leave you in any doubt of Melbourne's status as a food city. And while some Melburnians lunch on wan sandwiches at their desks, there's also plenty who are slurping noodles or hoeing into a slice of very good pizza.

Cafés are an integral part of life, with many Melburnians up early so they can catch up with colleagues (or just the newspaper) over a coffee and a slice of sourdough toast before the work day begins. Coffee quality is hotly debated; everyone has a favourite roaster and