

# Circuit Food I

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## Armidale

The Tamworth circuit was held in Armidale so that rebuilding of the ghastly thirties brick court house in Tamworth could proceed. Armidale Court House is an elegant Federation building with the coldest forecourt punters and witnesses have ever had to contend with, in my memory.

The party of the second part and I drove up the coast and stayed over in Port Macquarie before driving up through the spectacular ranges and rainforest of the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park, through Walcha and Uralla to Armidale. In Port we stayed at Sails Resort which is four-star and very swish. The pool was cold, but salt water and invigorating as well as fun.

We ate in a BYO fish restaurant called "Scampis" which let first class ingredients well cooked, down by some slap dashery at the edges. The seafood chowder was microwaved in the plate it was served in, cold in the middle and sticking to the plate at the edges. It was no better than ordinary. The oysters had been stored in a cold room or refrigerator and, although fresh tasting, were dead and had lost the lovely succulence that the Wallis Lakes ones usually have.

The bread was microwaved too and was spongy, warm and blah.

For one main we had delicious Tiger prawns fried in butter, lemon and garlic. These were fresh local produce and excellent. The other was grilled jewfish, two slabs of fresh and just-cooked flesh with just butter and lemon. This was the very best of the meal and worth going for on its own.

I would definitely go again, but I might be a bit picky.

All the sauces, with the oysters and with the mains, were the bulk bottled sort and best left alone. Stay with the fresh and simple.

In Armidale itself one has to say that in general the food is better than Tamworth. Sabatina's "Italian Ristorante" in the old Bishops court function centre was a mixed bag. The tomato and basil soup was delicious but the brains, with a mustard sauce and a tartlet, didn't work. The sauce drowned out the flavour of the brains and the tartlet seemed an irrelevant afterthought. The pastas were all right but not special, and the mushrooms were cooked in butter with cheese on top and too fatty for my taste.

A real find was the Armidale Bowling Club. I asked the guy in the fruit market, who looked to me as if food and drink were matters of interest to him, where one would get the best steak in town. Without hesitation he nominated this club. The first time we went I made the mistake of ordering a large rump. It came on a metal sizzling platter, overhanging the ends and I guess a pound cooked if it was an ounce! As rare as requested and just a bit charred. This was delicious; just what I felt like on a cold, wet, wintry night. The vegetables are bain marie and only what the bulk supply permits. The service was cheerful and brisk - a Cassegrain Cabernet Shiraz 1989 and two beers came about 50 seconds after we sat down. Bread and salad off a salad bar and quite OK. Annette had the small steak, only about 10 ounces, and chips to share. We

went back on a Sunday near to 7 pm and it fell apart. Peter O'Connor got a grey "rare" steak and made me write "I won't recommend a club restaurant again" 500 times.

The Cattleman's Motor Inn is the best place to stay, but the dining room is expensive and really only fair. A steak, much smaller than the Bowling Club's, cost \$23.90 and there was little to enthuse over. Breakfast, however, is excellent, served in the garden restaurant with plenty of fresh fruit, cereals and "hearty" breakfasts as well. The devilled kidneys rate a special mention; fresh, tender, tangy and satisfying.

The best of it, we thought, was the Cotswold Gardens Restaurant. The room itself is special: in an elegant old home offering accommodation, guest lounge, bar and billiard room, the dining room occupies the front section with stained glass leadlight windows. It is spacious but welcoming, with redwood tables, simply laid with quality linen, cutlery and china and has a big enclosed fire as a centrepiece.

The chef is Kelly Cartlidge, a charming woman in her early twenties I guess, who is cooking with flair and precision. The only disappointment in four visits was a minestrone which just needed more cooking, a rest and reheating. The beans were tough!

The mussels in tomato and garlic were piping hot and delicious, the sauce had white wine, chopped garlic and tomato: the New Zealand blue-lipped mussels were cooked in it then ladled into earthenware pots, a dollop of cheese put on top and finished under the griller, then served in the pots with lids on. For me the cheese was de trop but this whole dish was lovely, and piping hot for an Armidale winter's night.

The other entrée was chargrilled kangaroo with vegetable ribbons and vinaigrette. The medallions of kangaroo steak were thinly sliced and cooked on a hotplate, very fast, in garlic butter. The vinaigrette (hot) was made with balsamic vinegar, olive oil, thyme, oregano, marjoram and mustard seeds. This tasty dish was served with ribbons of zucchini, capsicum and carrot and made a special entrée.

For main course, to follow the mussels, I had steak and kidney pie. Kelly does this with an old-fashioned touch and it is easily the Cotswold's most popular winter dish. She begins with "stewing" steak - skirt or round usually - quickly fried in bite-size pieces with chunks of ox kidney to brown and then bubbled very slowly in homemade stock for three to four hours with just onions, some red wine and a splash of worcestershire sauce. Close to serving she adds a few quick-fried lambs' kidneys and ladles into individual pie dishes, puts puff pastry on top and finishes in a hot oven.

The party of the second part had penne pasta with veal pieces (off a knuckle I thought), shallots and shaved parmesan for sauce. This was light enough and very tasty.

The quality was such that we returned twice and then asked Kelly to "do" the Tamworth Kidney Night for us. When we cook it for ourselves we get it exactly as we like it, but she did very well as the 22 circuiters will attest.

On other visits we had a superb spicy fish soup, a sort of bouillabaisse with fresh chilli, and a barramundi with line and ginger grilled with butter for moistening. Hot damper

and toasted focaccia and the superb Pike's Clare Valley Riesling all hit the spot, too!

After the "Kidney Night" main course we had suet pudding, steamed with golden syrup and crème anglais (custard to you), another old-fashioned country special and just glutinous and scrumptious. Cognac for bed. A bit of old England in New England, but with modern flair.

*Scampis Marina Seafood Restaurant*

*Port Marina*

*Park Street*

*Port Macquarie*

*Tel: (065) 837 200*

*Hours: Dinner only 7 nights*

*Credit Cards: All major credit cards accepted, except Diners Club.*

*Sabitana's Italian Ristorante*

*(Opposite Negs in the) Highway*

*Armidale*

*Tel: (067) 71 1955*

*Hours: Dinner only Wednesday through Saturday from 6.00pm*

*Credit Cards: All major credit cards accepted, except Diners Club.*

*Armidale Bowling Club*

*Dumaresq Street*

*Armidale*

*Tel: (067) 72 5666*

*Cotswold Gardens Restaurant*

*34 Marsh Street*

*Armidale*

*Tel: (067) 72 8222*

*Hours: Dinner only 7 nights from 6.30pm*

*Lunch for group bookings only (minimum 5) by arrangement*

*Credit Cards: All major credit cards accepted.*

□ John Coombs QC

## **The Best of Byron Bay got the Ringmaster's Award for '95**

I have praised the work done by cooks at Byron Bay for years. The Lismore circuit remains a favourite because of the beauty of the Bay and the consistent high standards. The Rocks is good all day, breakfast especially. The Beach Hotel does top class fast food! I like the two Indian places too, but the new star is the "Raving Prawn". Peter Crittle, Major Domo of New South Wales Rugby, gave us the tip, and although I have had some to equal it, I have never had a better seafood meal.

Pauline Kinsella is a sharer so she joined Annette

and I in sampling three entrées. The first was small (not baby) octopus braised in red wine and served on a risotto. The braising had seared the legs somewhat and the juice and red wine had reduced to produce a delicious sticky sauce through the risotto. Seared calamari with chilli and Hoisin marinade on fine noodles came to Annette and the sweet but sharp flavour blended wonderfully with the first slightly burnt flavour of the calamari.

Next, spinach and ricotta gnocchi with a lemon butter and bacon sauce. These were also superb, gelatinous but light and flavoursome.

The mains continued the standard. A superbly fresh local and thick jewfish steak was cooked with herb, crumb and mustard crust under a very fast grill. New to me and just fabulous, tender sweet fish with a crispy top.

Annette chose the whole fresh local schnapper, plain grilled with a bed of jasmine rice and a chilli lime coriander and coconut sauce served separately.

We stayed with a range of Rhine Rieslings, Lindemans 4 figure bin number, Hunter and Margaret River because it had to be a "white" night.

This was a truly educational and memorable meal. We will return!

*The Raving Prawn*

*Fernos Arcade*

*Jonson Street*

*Byron Bay*

*Tel: (066) 85 6737*

□ John Coombs QC

## **Circuit Food II - Oxfordshire**

*From September 1994 to February 1995, I was the Invitation Visiting Scholar for Medico-Legal Studies at Green College, Oxford, where he dined as well as he dines in Armidale and Byron Bay.*

As you all know, I have always defined circuit broadly enough to encompass places on the way, on the way back, or out of the way altogether.

Bridging two terms at Oxford as the Green College Visiting Scholar seems as likely a circuit as many: Murray QC, Hickey, sister Janet and others have passed by, as have many Agent Orange colleagues.

English food is much maligned and quite unjustly. They do very good pub food, wonderful fish and chips, and no-one does game better.

Let me begin at "The Swan" at Swinbrook, 20 miles from Oxford just off the A40 going north towards Cheltenham and one and a half miles from where Annette and I lived in Burford, one of our 17 locals within walking distance. "Best steak and kidney pie in the Cotswolds" an Oxford octogenarian

confided. I haven't had it everywhere, of course, but it was truly superb. It came in an individual ceramic dish, about 7" x 5" x 3" full of juicy beef and lambs' kidneys (about one third) with onion and carrot in the gravy topped with a short buttery pastry crisp and moist. Vegies à la dente, sprouts, baby spuds and beans.

Other specialties which enhance this lovely snug old pub, with a river through it (it's an old Mill building) and swans, geese, tern and coot everywhere, are the Rabbit Forrestiere, rich and gamey, circular Cumberland sausage, pheasant casserole (finger-licking good!).

Other great locals are "The Angel" in Burford (Mussels Marinere and Braised Rabbit in Cider and Dijon Mustard), "The Royal Oak" (Celery and Stilton Soup), "The Mermaid" (a Yorkshire pudding "basin" with roast beef and gravy filling), and "The Royal William" at the crossroads near Stroud at the Painswick turn-off where the best suet pudding stuffed with a beef and mushroom stew is served every day. I had forgotten how luscious steamed suet puddings are!

But the meal of the month came by accident. Most of us still go to England some time and to Stratford when we do. A play there beckoned and, after it, I chose a restaurant called "The Lamb", by reference only to its blackboard menu. It has been in its present hands only five months, so it hasn't hit the "places to eat" books yet, but, believe me, it will.

We had had soup before the play so wanted only two mains to share. I chose Lamb Shank with Parsley Mash and Annette chose Guinea Fowl Casserole with Creamed Savoy Cabbage. As we sipped Theakstone Bitter, Julie brought tomato and plain Chiabata - "we make our own" she said casually. This bread should have alerted us: fresh, crunchy, full of flavour and with those holes in it that say it's been made by a person!

In about 20 minutes the two meals were brought proudly to the table. No other word will do - the place exudes commitment to excellence.

The shank was huge: the bottom third of the back leg of a baby lamb. The outside was crisp and it was soft and juicy all through and not quite falling off the bone. It was in a pool of fabulous full-flavoured stock - wine herb and garlic sauce. With it came a cone of parsley flavoured, olive oily mashed potatoes. The presentation was superb - the sauce glazed and with a sheen, thick and meaty red brown, the shank rampant and the cone of mash, green glossy erect beside it. This was a meal in a million, truly.

Was the guinea fowl a disappointment after this climax? By no means. Another piece of culinary artistry producing a gutsy meal hit the table at the same time. The sauce (of stock from the fowl carcass baked with carrots, leeks, celery, garlic and onion and slow-cooked for 12 hours!) had smoked back bacon, three sorts of wild mushrooms, shallots and thyme, marjoram and rosemary. In this the leg and thigh portions of the bird are slowly cooked, then removed and the sauce reduced after red and white wine and port are added. Again, superb presentation. The drumstick comes upright, the thigh and leg in the sauce beside the breast (quickly sealed

and roasted after your order is taken) and Cabbage Savoy à la dente with smoked bacon sweated in clarified butter next to that. Four pickling onions cooked in their skins in a very hot oven after a spray of olive oil then "popped", decorate the plate, glistening. Did I say they do game well? The best game meal I have ever had half of.

I went to talk to the owner/cook and the owner/maître d'manageress, Paul and Julie Desport, next morning. The shanks cook, after fast browning, for six hours, four before the stock boils and then simmer. A bottle of red and half a bottle of Ruby port go into the stock after it has absorbed shallots, herbs, a knob of garlic and just before the lamb shanks (20 in a huge pot!).

It is strained and reduced by half after the shanks are done.

This is patient, masterly cooking and it works superbly. Go there and tell them I sent you. I love them and they deserve the success they will get.

*Lambs on Sheep Street  
Stratford-on-Avon  
(089) 29 2554*

□ John Coombs QC

## Such Patience!

Peter Garling QC: Yes, I just want to get some terms right. As you know, I'm a slow moving barrister.

Witness (Dr Eric Fisher): That's difficult to believe.

Mr Garling: Sorry?

Witness: That's difficult to believe.

Mr Worthington: Which part?

His Honour: Mr Garling, you do not have to respond to either of those insulting comments from your colleagues.

Mr Garling: I will just keep going on. I am indebted to them.

*(Lipovac v H A Milton Holding Pty Ltd & Ors [Cor. Higgins J, ACT Supreme Court]).* □

## Freudian Slip

A slip of the pen occurred in transcribing the Solicitor General's submissions in the proceedings before Hunt CJ at CL over Mr Milat's legal representation. The case involved an application for a stay because the rates offered by the Legal Aid Commission to Mr Milat's lawyers were said to be inadequate. The transcript records (p222) the Solicitor General submitting:

*What this case is all about, no matter how many lawyers [sic] you peel away ...* □