

8 INDULGENCE

TABLES

JOLLY GOOD

The food and views are excellent at a new Brisbane restaurant, writes David Bentley

POSITION, position, position. Alchemy perches jauntily above the Brisbane River, very much the sort of chic restaurant that invites passers-by to look wistfully, if not wishfully, within. The odd thing is that there are no passers-by. You reach Alchemy via an elevator within a city building, seeing little of the fabulous water views until you are inside.

Mrs B fancies a table on the terrace. The waiter has another table in mind. A tussle of wills ensues, until owner Angelica Jolly (that's Angelica, not Angelina) intervenes, allowing us our table of choice. Why do waiters do this? Is it some sort of power trip that compensates for spending all day taking orders? Sit here, not there. It's only a table.

Come to that, it's a table without a cloth. In a high-rent zone such as this, I guess you make economics. Which may explain the absence of the complimentary treats that other restaurants offer. Between-course palate cleansers, for instance, cost \$3 a pop here. Presumably one can obtain post-prandial petits fours at a price, though I see no mention of them on the menu.

It's Wednesday. We've booked for 12.30pm and the place is filling fast: a clientele of suits drumming up busi-

ness, women-about-town letting their hair down, groups of well-to-dos savouring the fruits of success. No doubt some of them will indulge in the restaurant's caviar experience at \$250 for two: caviar with potato blinis, cornichons, capers, parsley, egg yolk, egg white, creme fraiche, lemon segments and vodka or champagne.

It reads enticingly but in the interests of gastronomic investigation we order from an a la carte menu that's mainly based on classical French-style dishes, conservatively conceived and expertly prepared.

The meal begins pleasantly, if predictably, with mineral water (\$5.50) and olive sourdough (\$4) accompanied by balsamic vinegar and olive oil. The view and the buzz of the room kick in. On the boardwalk below, joggers and rubber-necking tourists plod past. On the water, river ferries and CityCats bustle hither and thither; on the opposite bank, the chic new apartments of Kangaroo Point shimmer beyond the mangroves.

An attentive waitress (there has been a changing of the guard) pours our 2004 Langmeil Three Gardens Shiraz Grenache Mourvedre (\$39), mostly into our glasses, partly on to the table, and also persuades chef Brad Jolly to prepare braised beef cheeks

(\$21) for me as an entree (it's on special as a main).

Mrs B begins with sauteed ginger chilli bugs with spiced avocado, prawn toast and tomato consomme (\$23), a dish that offers visual delight and a fiesta of flavour, not to mention being a more sensible choice than the beef cheeks I have ordered on this muggy Queensland day.

Shredded and chilled bug meat and avocado have been pressed into an oblong, encircled by tomato consomme, with shards of crisp prawn toast adding taste and texture. It's light and delicious ... and, frankly, my exploration might have continued further had not Mrs B told me to eat my own lunch.

Quite different, my beef cheeks have been braised to the nubbin; fall-off-the-fork stuff, saturated with flavour and blessed with chunky bacon pieces and champignons in a rich reduction sauce. I love this dish but it's undeniably heavy, particularly when followed by the pot roast pheasant with herbed lentil vinaigrette, root vegetables and spiced prune jus (\$68 for two) that will soon appear before us.

For some reason we expect the pheasant to be theatrically presented in its cooking pot. Instead, it arrives on two plates, arranged in artful stacks

and soaked in a rich sauce derived from spiced prunes.

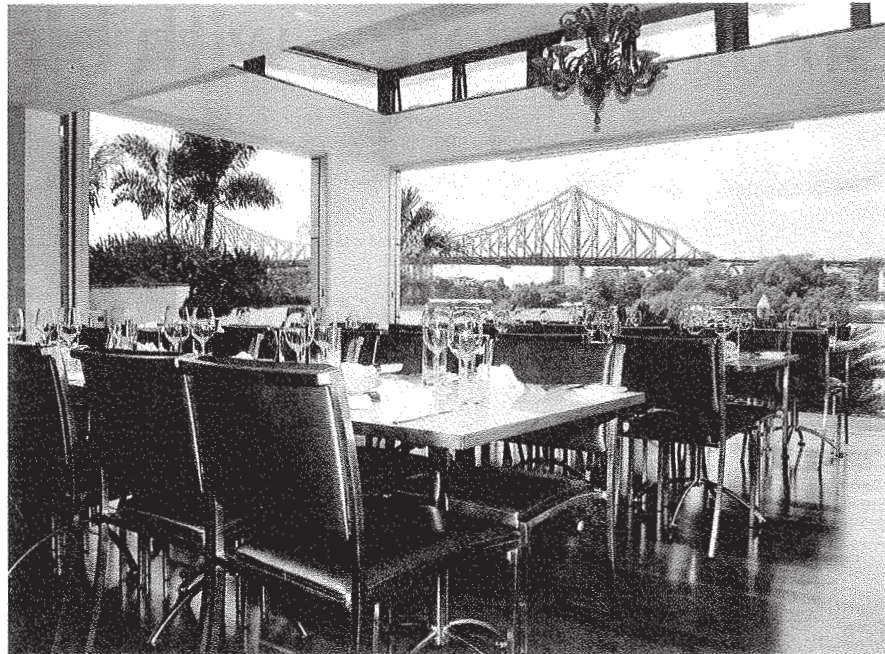
Some parts of the pheasant have weathered the cooking process better than others. The breast is moist and succulent but the drumsticks and wings are tough to the point of being impervious to knife and fork.

Also, the root vegetable component amounts to little more than a smattering of carrot, swede and turnip cubes, and it occurs to me that this dish would profit from fewer tough extremities and more vegetables.

According to the menu description, the pheasant comes with "herbed lentil vinaigrette", by which I assume vinegar and oil have contributed to the warm lentil sauce that enhances the poultry. When writing menus, it helps to chuck in the odd bit of French, though, as far as I am aware, vinaigrette — otherwise known as French dressing — is a sauce mainly used to enliven green salads and, occasionally, cold meat.

Still, Brad Jolly's lentil sauce has flavour to burn. If he wants to call it a vinaigrette, why not? It's his restaurant and a vinaigrette can be anything he wants it to be, particularly if it tastes as good as this one.

On the subject of menu French, at Alchemy rocket is known as roquette.



Good chemistry: With a lovely view to the Story Bridge and inspiring food, Alchemy works its magic Picture: Patrick Hamilton

I wonder how many diners realise that the feves served with pan-seared loin of lamb with smoked bacon and morel jus gras (\$38) are broad beans by another name.

Such pedantry aside, this is a fine restaurant that retains a sense of intimacy despite being big enough to seat 200. It incorporates an all-day bar serving tapas and a private dining room with its own courtyard.

Within a glass-walled cellar is displayed a range of offerings from affordable everyday wines through to a 1998 Dom Perignon (\$480) and 1990 magnum of Bollinger La Grande Annee (\$950).

For dessert, the soufflé of mango with spiced chutney (\$15) offers a touch of epicurean whimsy that appeals to Mrs B's sense of the bizarre, the chutney interacting surprisingly well with mango flavours and mascarpone ice cream. Oven-roasted pineapple brulee, pina colada ice cream and coconut gravel (\$15) presents elegantly, although I still have no idea what is meant by coconut gravel.

All *Tables* visits are unannounced and meals paid for.

Checklist

Alchemy Restaurant and Bar
175 Eagle St, Brisbane.
Phone: (07) 3229 3175;
www.alchemyrerestaurant.com.au
Open: For lunch Monday to Friday and dinner Monday to Saturday.
Cost: Entrees, \$19-\$23; mains, \$37-\$44; desserts, \$15.
Reason to return: For the cheese menu, which draws on Australia, France, Italy and California.