

Sage now comes of age

There's nothing overnight about the success that is surely coming to Sage in Gorman House. When we visited last, Harrington had huge plans, extend this, open that, twist this, hammer . . . you get the picture. So now, a year later, the restaurant and surrounds have changed so much as to make the nice little, simple dining room that once stood in this place unrecognisable.

Firstly, as you walk in from Batman Street, you will pass a mysterious looking bar with a Gatsbyesque West Egg-like garden that you walk through to the dining room. There's a lone barman there, he's smiling but his wave seems sombre, now I'm channelling *The Shining*. OK, we'll keep moving. There seems to be a huge row of shiny, unused beer taps ready for some party that we haven't been invited to, eerie.

On to the restaurant, where again, you do a double take. The simple entrance has gone and now you walk into what looks like a cross between British Raj India and Raffles in Singapore. Harrington has, as promised, extended the dining room, which now seats at least twice the number. It is moody, luxury at first glance, though the deer antlers over the bar are still there, thankfully.

Many staff flit around, and they're all dressed in their own get-up, no uniforms or aprons here. Harrington himself is resplendent in velour, controlling the room from the front desk. It's busy already with most tables up for a reset tonight.

So, OK, I'm liking this, and not just Facebook liking it, really liking it, before even sighting a menu or wine list. In the past, Sage has been solid, on the cusp of a B+ with good comments, big plans, and poised for, but not quite reaching, the high bar it set itself. Tonight, I'm thinking it's there. I've got a big A ready to stamp on the report card, maybe even A-plus. A new chef with a suitably French-sounding name

Bryan Martin



and provenance has been on deck for almost a year now. In fact, it sounds like he is here to stay, now he's taken on the running of the proposed self-sustaining property on Majura Lane that is owned by Harrington's business partner, and has partnered up with a local spouse. They've still got big plans here – to move in the direction of Biota dining in the Southern Highlands and raise, grow and produce everything they can for the dining room.

The menu is in the same format as last time, arranged into four sections. You can choose, with increasing value for money, two, three or four courses for respectively \$60, \$70 and \$80. The third is more main fare, with two slightly smaller-than-entree starters and a dessert. So two courses might seem quite expensive but four is great value. I'd recommend you fast for the day and go hard because the entire menu is littered with a flotilla of interesting arrangements and ingredients.

The menu changes all the time with lots of experimentation which should keep the regulars coming back for more.

None more so than the seafood choice: whitebait, razor clams, scampi, pearl meat, scallops, lobster, trout, mussels. They have hooked up with Joto seafood from Sydney that carries a high-end range of seafoods and supplies most of the decent restaurants in Sydney. You can follow him, Jules Crocker (@julesjoto) on Twitter, where he'll tweet what's interesting from the boats.

OK, enough about them. How was the food? Here's a quick snapshot of what we had.

A short jenga stack of sake-

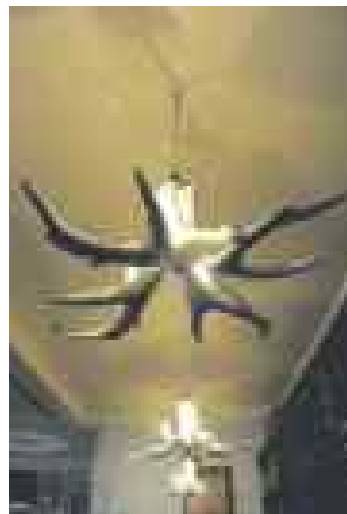


steamed razor clams with ginger, chilli and coriander (\$8). Love 'em, takes me back to La Barceloneta in Spain where we last had these long, weird-looking molluscs, which look like a mini alien on a tube. They take on their marinade and cooking juices so well and these were better than the last time. They're from New Zealand, we are told. This dish is on the list of pre-dinner snacks, and I tell you

they sound good, so wade into this little group of feeling-peckish items.

The first two dishes on the first-entree list will do for us, since we booked so late and are on a schedule to get out by 8pm. Truffled duck-egg custard with crispy bacon and reggiano soldiers – I like this grown-up baby's meal feel. I look for a bib and the sound of comforting words from my mum: "Bryan,

eat up your truffle." Within the perfectly cut orb of eggy joy sits a creamy mix of dark, betruffled custard with big slices of fine discs of dense, dark, excellently selected local truffle, the crunch from the crispy pancetta adding just enough texture, and it's kinda fun dipping our super-crisp toast fingers into the rich, umami-laden egg. I eat it all up without spilling a drop and look around for more, smiling.



Clockwise from main: sake-steamed razor clams, chilli, ginger and coriander; butterscotch creme brulee, elderflower ice cream, brandy snap and salted caramel; truffled duck egg custard, crispy bacon and parmigiano reggiano soldiers; inside Sage; confit ocean trout, baby beetroot, tahini yoghurt and sesame crisp; and chef Clement Chauvin. Photos: Graham Tidy

pickled cabbage and orange are set off beautifully with a drizzle of liquorice. The dish is well balanced and again has the mix of textures that are a hallmark of the menu and chef.

Confit ocean trout, baby beets, tahini yoghurt and sesame crisp is a take on the beautiful slowcooked method Tetsuya has given the world for ocean trout. Just so tender, juicy, slippery. Love the crackers. They give the dish a snap, crackle and pop. It all works so well, great size, balanced, thoughtful, all that sort of stuff.

The wine list has taken a turn for the better, too, with not just a decent range of locals by the glass or bottle, but a really fresh, modern, wide-ranging list, yet still of a size that doesn't require a Master of Wine to get. We share a bottle of 2009 Shaw and Smith M3 Chardonnay (\$72), which is understanding the food

and quite brilliant with the trout. They've managed to keep us moving at a pace that allows us to partake in the pleasure of the sweets. Just bring us what you recommend (at this stage, they've worked out that I'm actually a superhero in disguise – Eatingman and my side kick – and hence give me the background and story, damn it. I'll have to change outfits again).

So we get a dish that seems like a must to order – butterscotch creme brulee, elderflower ice cream, brandy snap and salted caramel. Plus an experimental flowerpot. The brulee is very tidy, all the flavours well met with the light, fragrant floral ice cream and the juxtaposed crumbled and salted caramel adding the perfect seasoning, giving everything more body and bringing out unseen flavours. Really very good, indulgent, complex.

Sage Restaurant

Address: Gorman House Arts centre, Batman street, Braddon

Phone: 6249 6050

Website:

www.sagerestaurant.net.au

Owner: Peter Harrington

Chef: Clement Chauvin

Hours: Lunch Friday, dinner Tuesday to Saturday

Licensed: Yes, plus BYO, corkage \$15 a bottle

Vegetarian: A couple of choices

To pay: All cards, except Diner's Club

Wheelchair access: Yes

Seats: 80

Food ★★★★★

Wine list ★★★★★

Style ★★★★★

Value for money ★★★★★

Service ★★★★★

Score 16/20

Summary: A realisation of many years planning, Sage's star is shining brightly, brilliant refurbishment and quite excellent food set the stage.

11 something went wrong. **12** not so great tonight. **13** fine for a cheap and cheerful, not so for a place that aspires to the top end. **14** good. **15** really good. **16** great, when can we move in. **17-20** brilliant. The stars are a quick reference to the key highs or lows. They do not relate directly to the score out of 20.

The flowerpot is like a culinary advert for Floriade. It feels derivative – you find “plants” growing out of “dirt” all over the place now. In this case, under a dusting of chocolate sits a mix of sweet pumpkin laced with cumin, emerging from the sweet earth are three little caramelised sage leaves. I'm expecting a little flagpole to pop up and unfurl with a banner and then mini fireworks to complete theatrics. It's an unusual combination. I'm not totally taken with it. The normally savoury ingredients actually morph to a dessert quite well. It's more getting your head around something that should be soup.

I commend Sage to you. A great amount of effort and thought has been put together to make the team here a real contender in the local dining scene. It just goes to show, effort will pay off.

The other entree heads into northern Western Australia, with Broome pearl meat, which is sort of like a cross between abalone and scallop, with an apple “cloud”, black olive petals and sweet balsamic. This is very textural, the slightly tough pearl meat is lightened by a very green cube – ie, a cloud – of green-apple-flavoured air. At first, this is sort of strange like that old shampoo ad, you remember:

“Beautiful hair (a 1970s model with suitable thick locks in an orchid) fresh as green apples”, but once you add to the fork some olive scratchings and the sweetness of balsamic, it's all there, the balance of sweetness and saltiness drives a whole pile of flavour out of the meat.

Much like the main course, a take on duck a l'orange, a crispy, tender breast, pressed confit leg with a lovely condiment of