

**A GREEK AFFAIR**  
The good-time vibe is infectious at The Press Club.

# Genuine article

*George Calombaris' The Press Club is not only turning heads, his modern Greek cuisine is turning upside down what we know about feta, olives, oregano and all other things Hellenic, too.*

It's a Tuesday night in Melbourne. All our Major Events have packed up. Winter looms. And George Calombaris' The Press Club is booked solid. Again. Don't get me wrong, I'm not confusing critical and popular acclaim. Heaven knows lots of bad restaurants book out. But if you were to take informed anecdotal feedback as your sole source, The Press Club is *not* a bad restaurant.

It is, in fact, one of the few big-name places to open here during the past year about which seemingly no-one has anything bad to say. And that's unusual. Calombaris' phoenix-like return to the spotlight has been a good news story everyone seems to want to get on board with.

After the flamboyant Reserve – which was not Calombaris' restaurant, by the way – closed in the wake of some rather adventurous games in the field of molecular gastronomy in 2005, young Calombaris started thinking about a way of fusing his training (technique-heavy classical), his interests (modern food that puts emphasis on presentation, texture and challenging conventions) and his heritage (Greek Cypriot). And what he came up with, while not a unique restaurant concept (it's a flash CBD brasserie after all, with good service, smart interior design, a good wine list with probably the best selection of Greek wines in Australia, and predictable prices) is indeed unique food.

And as you eat here over the months, taking in maybe 30 dishes in that time, you begin to form a picture of The Press Club's oeuvre: it melds design, rusticity (and if you thought they were mutually exclusive, here's proof to the contrary), whimsy, classical skills, a sense of adventure *and* a sense of Greekness. This is feta, oregano, filo, olives, watermelon, lemon, saffron, pistachios, octopus, fish, lamb and olive oil – but not as you may know them. And while some dishes step out there with their modernity, one senses the chef-turned-restaurateur never again wants the bone of pretentiousness pointed at him again, the way it occasionally was at Reserve. For a 28-year-old in his first restaurant, he shows remarkable composure in the face of success he admits to never having anticipated.

At the table, within the abbey-like granite walls of the old *Herald* and *Weekly Times* edifice, remarkable attention to detail suggests Calombaris has been thinking not only about the food, but just about every other matter that might concern a diner, too. It signifies that transition from chef to restaurateur.

Following the pouring of San Pellegrino or Aqua Panna (more-or-less compulsory at \$9 per head all you can drink), take the opening salvo: it's house-baked breads, one black olive,



**MIGHTY APHRODITE**  
Clockwise from above: salad of cumin-roasted beetroot with pistachio biscuit; 'modern tzatziki' with yoghurt ravioli; chef George Calombaris (left) and restaurant manager/sommelier Angie Giannakodakis.



all chunky and rustic, the other walnut, softer crust and gentler sponge. They come with a cracking olive oil and black salt flakes.

"Textures of the Greek salad, 'Greek seafood fries'" is the chef's way of announcing an entrée that comprises a feta soufflé; a tomato tea brine infusion with cucumber and candied olive; there's a cucumber jelly topped with cucumber and dill tossed in olive oil; and a remarkable sorbet of Kalamata olive garnished with more candied olive. To finish the assembly, scattered across the logo-stamped presentation paper, 20 or so fried whitebait. Fish and salad, Calombaris-style: welcome to my taverna.

Next up, chargrilled octopus from the Clarence River in New South Wales, with a dressing of shallot, garlic, raisins and diced grapes with olive oil and tomato ketchup. This is one of the simplest and best things to come out of the kitchen, evoking memories for most of us and creating new ones, too.

One of the dressings found with several dishes combines Attiki Greek honey with a hint of fish sauce for an intriguing sweet/salty hit. It's used to great effect with cumin-roasted beetroot served with a cake-like cylinder the chef calls a 'pistachio biscuit'. It's sweet, made with lots of oil and nuts, and provides a truly intriguing foil to the spicy, earthy vegetable. Throw in a couple of marble-sized labna balls coated in fresh herbs and (fish sauce aside) you have one of the most delightful vegetarian dishes in Melbourne. ➔



'FETA AND WATERMELON'

Another unique starter plays to the aesthetic audience: scallop loukoumades – a play on a traditional Greek doughnut-like dessert – on long, pink stripes of tarama (made with potato instead of bread). They scatter about some lemon and honey dressing, candied lemon zest and a confetti of baby beetroot shoots and, as with most of the food here, create something that works at every level, a knockout.

Our final entrée is what Calombaris calls his 'modern tzatziki'. It starts with a slippery hung yoghurt raviolo flavoured with lemon zest and honey; next to it, a mound of fresh cucumber 'spaghetti'; finally, there's a baked filo cigar filled with green olive and grapes. Texture, technique, fun, presentation and roots; it's all here.

The roast of the day – this day – is suckling pig and it's about as simple as it gets: a bed of white bean skordalia, layers of excellent spit-roasted meat slices, a 'salad' or garnish of apple matchsticks and watermelon dice with a final crowning of wafer-thin crackling. The sauce is a simple reduction of stock and roasting juices and goodies from the spit. It comes with extraordinary lemon-flavoured but crisp roasted potatoes and a marouli – or shredded iceberg lettuce – salad. A lunchtime hit with the accountants and bankers, no doubt.

I'm more interested in his fish. It's a simple piece of seasoned and seared salmon. And yet... Calombaris serves it with a crown of oysters baked in kataifi pastry while on the plate is a garnish of cauliflower roasted with raisins and pistachios, and a dressing of creamy sauce based on trahana, the traditional Greek Cypriot cracked wheat that is dried, mixed with milk and allowed to sour slightly. Naturally, Calombaris has buzzed this one into a froth, but, as a foil to its partners, this new-to-Melbourne idea in contemporary cookery works a treat. While you're working through this appealing menu, put yourself in the sommeliers' hands; you may never have a better opportunity to shake off misconceptions about Greek wines than under the guidance of managers Angie Giannakodakis and Andrew Phillpot. A dry, aromatic white, such as the Notios, a roditis blend made by Domaine Gaia in the Peloponnese, may have you recanting all those bad retsina jokes. Desserts give the chef unlimited scope: mastic (for a panna cotta); pistachio, cinnamon and orange (for a brûlée);

## MELBOURNE RESTAURANT NEWS

**Designs on Crown** Guillaume Brahimi has made the all-important selection of a design firm for his impending bistro at Crown. Hecker, Phelan & Guthrie, the Melburnians responsible for the local Longrain, Comme, Sydney's Establishment Hotel and the Hemmes family's new Ivy, will design the two-level restaurant. Brahimi and designer Kerry Phelan recently made a four-day research trip to Paris for ideas.

**Moving on** With the opening of his latest venture The Commercial Bakery (with partner Chris Kerr), Melbourne café king Con Christopoulos has been in disposal mode. He sold Degraes Espresso Bar late last year and, recently, his bistro Benito's. Mario Fijan stays on as Benito's head chef.

**New home for Hako** Talented Japanese chef Masahiro Horie, the man behind the excellent food at petite CBD gem Hako, has found a new home. Hako moves this month from a shoebox in Degraes Street to premises in Flinders Lane that were once home to wacky organic fine diner Zukini. Horie's partner Ji-ah Kim will design the interiors.

### THE PRESS CLUB

72 Flinders St, Melbourne, Vic, (03) 9677 9677,  
www.thepressclub.com.au. Licensed. Lunch Mon-Fri, noon-3pm;  
Sun, 11.30am-3pm. Dinner daily 6pm-10pm.

**Prices** Entrées \$16-\$25; mains \$34-\$60; desserts \$15-\$17.

**Vegetarian** The kitchen will cater for any dietary requirements.

**Noise** Too much, occasionally.

**Wheelchair access** Yes.

**Plus** Love the Greek 'yum cha' on Sundays, with rolling mezedes.

**Minus** The noise at night.

and with the ingredients of baklava served with smoked chocolate ice-cream (hey, it had to come out somewhere).

Two desserts stand out. Baked baby tomatoes, each filled with a sticky fruit and nut 'stifado', is appealing in every sense. At the centre are several mounds of ice-cream made with cinnamon from Cyprus with a rippled nougatine wafer jammed between them for crunch. Intriguing. The other thrills me even more. Using a base of rosé Champagne jelly, Calombaris sets up a composition that includes brik pastry, a feta 'cheesecake' filling (all rich, soft and tangy), three golf balls of watermelon and an orb of yoghurt sorbet with lime syrup through it. On the plate, basil oil and a few micro herbs. It knocks down some sweet/savoury conventions and shows young Calombaris as a chef with broad horizons. Kind of makes you proud.

And his devoted staff, nearly all of whom have been at The Press Club since before it opened, should make the boss proud. They get on with the job of providing service brilliantly.

There's an infectious air of pride about The Press Club, about doing something genuinely new and great with Greek ideas in food and wine that most of us seem to find appealing. Even when it's jolly noisy, it's as much a function of a 'good times' vibe as acoustics. A word against them? Not from me. \*