

Regional revolution

_ STORY BY **SCOTT BOLLES** _ PHOTOGRAPH BY **JESSICA SHAPIRO**

A SEASONED foodie recently recounted a story about a work trip to regional South Australia. He found himself in a serious restaurant with a pleasant interior and an adventurous menu. After the waitress recited a lengthy list of enterprising specials, someone in his party asked what the soup du jour was? The waitress said she'd check with the chef, and the diners were left to ponder what seasonal delicacy the restaurant might transform into its soup of the day. The waitress returned from the kitchen, addressing the entire group. "It's soup of the day," she said, without any further elaboration.

Staff, and finding trained staff specifically, remains consistently near the top of the complaints list for our regional restaurants. Necia Wilden, co-editor of *The Age Good Food Guide*, says the effects of the drought and staff issues are the two biggest hurdles facing Victoria's country restaurants. Simon Thomsen, a 12-year veteran of the NSW regional restaurant beat and co-editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*, groans about the general standard of floor staff at country restaurants. Yet you have to wonder if we're misplaced applying city standards to country dining experiences? And there are exceptions. In his latest guide, Thomsen gave a silver service award to the owner of a restaurant in Bellingen over more fancied city rivals. The winner – Toni Urquhart of No. 2 Oak Street – was reportedly not only a charming and enthusiastic host, but a great sommelier to boot.

The relationship between city and country in regard to food remains a cloudy one. Thomsen cites the exodus of city chefs to country

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restaurants as important in the evolution of country standards. He also pinpoints city benchmarks as helping to push up country standards. "Coffee has certainly improved in the country over the past decade. A lot of places used to have espresso machines but, in many cases, they were glorified milk frothers. You'd see them put two scoops of instant coffee in with boiling water, then top it with frothed milk."

"The gap has narrowed between country and city restaurants at the top end," Wilden says. "I recently had a steak at the New Spanish Bar & Grill at the Grand Hotel in Mildura that was just as good as Rockpool." But the notion that sophisticated city diners with city expectations have somehow pulled the regional dining scene up by the bootstraps is questionable. Where the city rich play on weekends doesn't always equate to better eateries.

Areas such as the Palm Beach environs at Sydney's northern edge might have multimillion-dollar beach houses by the acre, but it has long been seen as an underperformer in the restaurant stakes. One theory is the restaurants simply aren't adequately supported. Tired of a midweek diet of rich restaurant experiences – on weekends, holiday-makers retreat to their own kitchens and barbecues for simpler fare. When they do entertain, they get caterers.

"We were talking about this the other day," Wilden says. "Regional areas where the wealthy go but there isn't a strong food scene. They prefer to spend their money on special cars or their children's education. [Victoria's] Portsea and Sorrento don't have the cluster of good restaurants Red Hill does." For every Noosa and Byron Bay, there's a regional flatliner. Macquarie Bank veteran David Clarke argues the food scene in the Hunter Valley, the winemaking area a couple of hours north of Sydney where he's been involved for more than 20 years, has stagnated. "If anything, it has gone backwards. There isn't a restaurant with a single hat in the Hunter (in the current *SMH Good Food Guide*). We really should have four or five [hatted restaurants]."

Late last year Clarke and his nephew, Andrew Clarke, opened a restaurant, Rock, at his Hunter winery Pooles Rock. "I'd applaud if someone else got a hat," he adds. "I've been wanting to do something there for a long time. Andrew wants to have the best restaurant in Australia. I want

that too, but I also want to sell more wine. Operating a restaurant like this is more of a challenge outside of Sydney. Sure, there isn't rent. But there's the cost of construction, and the supply of good staff is hard."

The fixation that cheaper rent in the country gives regional restaurants a competitive environment over their city rivals isn't necessarily the case. Thomsen sites Wategos Beach on the NSW far North Coast. "It's the most expensive property outside of [Sydney's] Darling Point. And the transport costs for produce are much higher for regional restaurants."

The push of top-level chefs into the country has brought clusters of great regional dining. And they're able to offer something our city restaurants can only dream of replicating. Says Thomsen: "The regional restaurant scene has absolutely exploded. More and more of them are in touch with great local produce. It has really opened eyes to what's out there." ■