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SIMON THOMSEN

REVIEW



Winning combination ... scallop tortellini.

Photos: Simon Thomsen

## A pilgrim finds his rock

Riches abound in the cavernous space that is the millionaire's other factory.

Biting into a perfectly balanced, sweetly bitter radicchio tarte Tatin (\$10/\$20/\$30) smothered with creamy, sharp Binnorie labna and heady with basil is reminiscent of a first kiss with a new love. It's a tantalising blend of anticipation, relief, spine-tingling thrill and flooding pleasure. And that's just the flaky house-made puff pastry. I've found the Hunter restaurant of my dreams.

Rock has good genes. Macquarie Bank bigwig David Clarke's other passion has been Poole's Rock winery. He teamed up with his nephew, chef Andrew Clarke, last year to create this fine dining destination on the Pokolbin winery side. Sure uncle Dave's money helped, but the simple truth is that it couldn't succeed without his talented relative, whose solid, classical French technique is reinforced by premium produce, careful attention to detail – right down to Mariage Freres teas – and a menu that cleverly balances finesse and restraint with the flourish of creamy excess.

Andrew Clarke's exceptional ability was honed under the likes of Tim Pak Poy at Claude's, Steve Manfredi at Bel Mondo and Serge Dansereau at the Bathers' Pavilion. It shows, again and again, with precision on the plate.

For what's essentially a glorified corrugated tin shed, Rock rises stylishly above its industrial origins. To have one waiter opening the large glass front door while another greets us feels Tetsuya's-esque, especially when you look onto a Japanese stone garden. To the right is a lounge bar. The chef even dabbles in cocktails with a martini (\$19) made from truffle-infused vanilla vodka and butterscotch schnapps.

By day, when it becomes a wood-fired pizza-serving cafe, the cavernous dining room with its polished concrete floor looks out over 90-year-old shiraz vines. At night, under a soft glow, white egg lamps flicker on the white linen-covered tables with their velvety high-backed chairs. Knowledgeable service balances attentiveness with just the right amount of laidback country charm.

An amuse bouche of lemony house-made salt cod in choux pastry promises adventure ahead. The small, smart wine list intersperses the excellent house wines with Australian marques such as Brokenwood's Graveyard shiraz. If only I'd bought Mac Bank shares way back when, then I could afford the 1999 Francois Lamarche Grands-Echezeaux (\$690) but

### Rock Restaurant, Pokolbin 15.5/20

**The Summary** This first class winery restaurant, based on flexible French fine dining, sets the benchmark for the Hunter Valley.

**Value** Very good.

**Chef** Andrew Clarke.

**Owners** David and Andrew Clarke.

**Service** Solid, sharp and friendly.

**Food** Contemporary.

**Wine** Small, smart and stylish mix of local and global marques; from \$8 a glass.

**Vegetarians** Full menu available.

**Child friendly** Kids menu, high chairs.

**Noise** Reasonable.

**Wheelchair access** Yes.

**Prices** Tasting, \$10-\$20; entrees, \$20-\$40; mains \$30-\$60; dessert \$7-\$16; Most cards.

**Where and When** Debeyers Road, Pokolbin, 4998 6968. Dinner Thu-Sat, 6-10pm; Firestick Cafe, daily, 9.30am-5pm.

**Scoresheet online**, see [smh.com.au](http://smh.com.au).

the Cockfighter's Ghost pinot noir (\$52) contents both the palate and wallet.

Clarke's menu is shrewdly flexible, designed to give all 10 savoury dishes in tasting, entree or main sizes. Depending on how richly you choose, three tasters is probably enough.

Mud crab tian (\$18/\$36/\$54) studded with tomato, avocado and finely shaved fennel is capped by a vividly green fennel and cucumber jelly. The meaty crab flavour is sweetened by vanilla salt, but the jelly, while refreshing, doesn't deliver quite the right contrast and perhaps needs a more lime-citrus note, especially since it sits in a pool of rich, lightly spicy shellfish sauce.

Scallop tortellini (\$12/\$24/\$36) float on a perfect white wine sauce. I'd forgotten how good this cream-based sauce could be. The perfect pasta encases a mousse-like filling that keeps the texture of shellfish and king brown mushrooms. It's lifted by a trace of dill, while crisp pancetta adds crunch in this new variation on Sydney's favourite combo.

Deep-fried squab (\$20/\$40/\$60) is deliciously rich. Clarke dips the bird in masterstock, then dries it for several days to concentrate the flavour. It's still rare, on house-made brioche with thyme-scented slippery jack mushrooms sauteed in brandy and cream. Fresh peas stop things becoming completely *La Grande Bouffe*.

Duck breast (\$14/\$28/\$42) on zucchini noodles swirls with herbs and spices. It's flattered by a subtle yet complex liquorice

sauce and under the skin is a finely chopped, fragrant stuffing of apple, sultanas and hazelnuts. A sprinkling of shredded zucchini flowers and winter cress adds a lift.

Grilled wagyu rump (\$20/\$40/\$60), soft, moist and flavoursome, is brilliantly matched with a creamy puree of Jerusalem artichoke, its excesses absolved by a delicate, carefully dressed herb salad.

A rare flat spot is an overcooked side of steamed broccolini with toasted almonds (\$7) and the bitterness you look for in a chocolate and merlot sauce for venison (\$16/\$32/\$48) on king mushroom noodles is lost to sweetness, mostly from roasted quince.

For dessert, Clarke gives a twist to Damien Pignolet's chocolate tart with coffee anglaise (\$8/\$16) by adding mascarpone made locally by Binnorie Dairy. It adds a pleasingly sour note to the smooth and silky tart, while sour cream ice-cream performs a similar role for a lush cognac-soaked prune clafoutis (\$8/\$16) with crunchy almond praline.

I've been waiting a long time for this moment, wondering if Godot would arrive in the Hunter Valley before a restaurant at the benchmark standard of Rock. You'll find more than 100 places to eat between the grapevines and golf courses. Most are as appealing as a row of riesling around here.

As Estragon says to Vladimir, "Yes, let's go." With apologies to Samuel Beckett, I'd add, "to Rock".

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