



PIPERS CALLS THE TUNE

IN A WINE REGION OFTEN REFERRED TO AS AUSTRALIA'S 'OTHER RED CENTRE', COUNTRY SOUTH AUSTRALIA COLLIDES WITH EUROPE IN A CLASSIC DINING EXPERIENCE.

STORY GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOS JO FINCHAM



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The weatherboard building that houses Pipers of Penola was once a Methodist church; locally grown produce features on the menu; Simon Bowen has come home to Coonawarra with his Californian wife Erika to offer a European-style dining experience.

PIPERS OF PENOLA is tucked away at the end of a long road bustling with gourmet travellers but, for chef Simon Bowen, it's more like the road less travelled. After several years working in the US followed by a rewarding stint at Alla Wolf-Tasker's celebrated Lake House in Daylesford, Vic, this son of a winemaker headed home to the Limestone Coast six years ago to start his own food venture. He made an offer on a business that wasn't even on the market and, when the owner agreed to sell, it was clearly meant to be.

The restaurant Simon now operates with his Californian wife Erika is just minutes from the Coonawarra winery where he was raised, and he relishes that sense of familiarity. "While I was away I really missed it here and, for us as first-time business operators, it was a wise decision to come home and work and have that family support – especially with a young family of our own," he says. "And how can you go wrong with Coonawarra?"

Pipers has become the perfect platform to showcase the Bowens' talents in the kitchen and the vineyard, but Simon and Erika have taken it several steps further, offering a full European-style dining experience with white linen, fine china and attentive table service. "We offer it because it's a really nice way to eat food and enjoy it," Erika says. "It creates an atmosphere that provides the best food and wine experience you can have."

The menu's strong European influence, however, has been married with decidedly regional flavour. "We work with our environment and what we can get down here – what's local, what's in season, what's good," Simon says. "At the moment I'm loving yabbies from the freshwater springs just outside Penola. We steam them and serve them in their own bisque with a Parisian-style gnocchi, horseradish peas and basil foam. We also go through heaps of wagyu from Mayura Station in Millicent – people can't get enough of it, and I'm not surprised because it's the best wagyu beef I've tasted."



The braised duck served with a sauce made from brandied cumquats is another big hit. So is the southern rock lobster plucked fresh from the chilly ocean depths, which arrives at the table as a soufflé paired with seared scallops and garlic toast. Erika then pours a consommé onto the plate, creating a delectable fusion of flavours and aromas. "You need this type of service to enjoy our type of food," she says. "It's the complete story."

When it comes to sourcing local produce, Simon and Erika know every supplier by name. Their butcher fattens his own lambs, and freshly cut bunches of herbs are delivered daily from a garden in Penola's historic Petticoat Lane, made famous by Australia's first Catholic saint, Mary MacKillop. On his days off, Simon can often be found foraging for wild ingredients; local forests are full of slippery jacks and pine mushrooms, and succulent watercress can be found where the creeks and streams flow into the sea. "When people come to the country, they expect local ingredients, and we are offering a really localised food style," Simon says.

Simon admits that a bit of "home-town advantage" has helped build Pipers' popularity. "We attract a really good cross-section of diners – a lot of travellers, but there is also an enormous amount of local support," he says. "The Coonawarra wineries like to entertain



SEARED PARISIAN GNOCCHI & LOCAL YABBIES

Serves 4

INGREDIENTS

8 fresh yabbies
1 cup green peas
1 tsp crushed garlic
Basil leaves, to garnish

Gnocchi

1½ cups water
50g butter
2 cups plain flour
4 eggs
1 tbsp Dijon mustard
Chives, chopped
Salt and cracked black pepper

METHOD

Place live yabbies in freezer for 15 minutes. Steam yabbies for about 4 minutes until shells have changed to a deep orange colour. Place in refrigerator immediately.

In a saucepan bring the water to a boil and melt butter into the water. Once completely melted make a choux pastry by adding the flour to the saucepan while stirring vigorously. The mix will become dough-like. Continue stirring over a low heat to cook the flour out. This should take about 5 minutes.

Put the dough mix in an electric mixer and beat on low. Then gradually add eggs, one at a time, mixing each thoroughly before adding the next. Once eggs are thoroughly incorporated, season with salt, black pepper, mustard and chives. Place in a piping bag with a medium size nozzle.

Using a knife, cut 1cm pieces from the piping bag over boiling water. Do this in small batches, cooking for 2 minutes at a time. Plunge hot gnocchi into cold water to stop cooking process. Once all gnocchi is cooked, drain from water and lightly toss in oil. Set aside.

Once yabbies are cold, shell them collecting meat from the tail and claws. Discard the heads. To assemble the dish, lightly sauté the gnocchi in a hot pan until golden. Turn down heat and add yabby meat, peas and crushed garlic. Season to taste, add basil to garnish and serve immediately.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Pipers has a rustic charm; a kingfish from South Australia's Port Lincoln; Simon plates up gnocchi and yabbies; Erika offers attentive table service to complement Simon's dishes; seared Parisian gnocchi and local yabbies.

and are always bringing international guests here, and we have a lot of people off the land as well."

The whitewashed weatherboard building that houses the restaurant started out in 1908 as a Methodist church. After World War I, it became the Returned Serviceman's League before being handed over to the Caledonian Society in the 1950s. Pipers and drummers practised every week in the building for nearly 50 years before it was sold, renovated and reopened as a restaurant in 2001. The renovation work attracted a great deal of interest when a full cow skeleton, 12 putrid duck eggs and 50 empty whisky bottles were found beneath the floor when the building was raised and restumped.

The blackwood bar in the front dining room was formerly a counter at the old Mount Gambier Post Office. It holds a huge variety of prized Coonawarra drops, as well as an exciting selection of wines from other regions. Meanwhile, at the back of the building, a function room features a magnificent limestone wall made from rubble sourced from a vineyard close to the coastal resort town of Robe. "The stone has been left exactly as it was found and, if you look closely, there are bits of straw and wool and even a fossil or two," Erika says.

The building may be rustic, but the restaurant oozes nothing but class, and it has the awards to prove it – Pipers of Penola has been named SA's Best Regional Restaurant for four out of the past five years. "Sure, it would be fun to have a little pizzeria in a tin shed, but our style of food, the variety of wine and the restaurant itself really complements the region," Simon says.

PIPERS OF PENOLA

Entrees: \$16-\$20
Mains: \$30-\$37
Desserts: \$15-\$20
Wheelchair accessible.
Licensed and BYO (wine only).
Open Tuesday-Saturday from 6pm.
58 Riddoch Street, Penola SA 5277
Phone (08) 8737 3999
www.pipersofpenola.com.au

