

Fay Maschler

A brave, spirited dinner from an expat Aussie — Stokey is lucky to have her



RESTAURANT OF THE WEEK

Wander

★★★★☆

214 Stoke Newington High Street, N16 (020 7249 7283, wanderrestaurant.com), Wed-Sat 6pm-11pm. Chef's menu, £35. Wine flight, £25. A la carte for two with wine, about £100 inc. 12.5 per cent service.

WANDER is what chef-patron Alexis Noble has done. From growing up in Cronulla, a suburb south of Sydney, and training in various esteemed kitchens in that city, during which time she was shortlisted for the Josephine Pignolet Young Chef of The Year Award, she has travelled and sometimes cooked in India, Nepal, Bhutan and the US, before coming to London — a destination in most Aussie walkabouts — where she worked for James Knappett at Kitchen Table. Once in Europe — Blighty still is Europe, just — she seized the opportunity to explore, fitting in cooking for a family in Rome.

Back in Sydney, Alexis decides to open up a London restaurant, writes a business plan, comes over and in three days finds a site in Stoke Newington. Wander, launched in November 2017, is a self-funded project with the private room below the 35-seat ground-floor restaurant built by Alexis 18 months later. She is, how shall we say, a competent Sheila.

At the second visit, when there is a private party in the basement and, quite quickly, a full ground floor, Alexis, visible in the open kitchen, seems to be coping on her own with not even a kitchen porter to help. My friend Melanie and I decide to go with the Chef's Banquet at £35 each, a parade of a dozen smallish dishes priced on the menu from £3-£14 to share.

I start with an Aussie Negroni, with Adelaide Hills Bitter Orange standing in for Campari, as that seems only polite and sensible. It has a fogginess that I appreciate. In those surveys of recent trends in the food world I haven't noticed any mention of the elevation of prawn toasts, but believe me it is a thing and in evidence here. Instead of a smear of what might just as well be surimi or krill on cheap white bread, these are proud identifiable prawns, under a carapace of toasted sesame seeds on decent toast. And it comes with a dip.

It is almost cast into the shade, however, by the exceptional sourdough served with whipped Vegemite (developed by one Cyril Percy Callister in Melbourne in 1922, who could also be credited with the rise of salted caramel) butter. The combination is nourishing bliss. What follows with well-judged timing is a combination of hits and near misses, the former outweighing the latter. I'll go with them first.

A flat-topped hill of homemade ricotta is topped with chopped fresh figs and bathed in honey and fig leaf oil. It's pre-eminence is challenged by truffle burrata with gooseberry and Thai basil, a slightly reckless global tour that turns



PICTURES: DANIEL HAMBURY



Aussie rules: Wander, Stoke Newington, main. Above, left to right, chef Alexis Noble, razor clams poached in cider and sourdough with Vegemite butter



out triumphant. The star dish is based on an ingredient I am not normally wild about. Razor clams have been poached in cider and garnished with nduja, crushed new potatoes and coriander. It is a brilliant melding of flavours and textures, the apple-y alcohol balancing the spice of the sausage and the soft potato knuckling under to the muscle of the shellfish. The resulting sauce calls for the last of the sourdough.



The success of heritage tomato with watermelon, sesame and shiso salad depends on the sunniness of tomatoes, whatever their background or education, and it is missing here. Accompaniments of aloe vera, guava and lemon basil granita turn the ceviche of scallop served in its shell into something faintly medicinal or maybe cosmetic. Pea and feta ravioli with rocket pesto and hazelnut has scant feta presence or flavour

from the sauce and the peas are like little bullets. On another evening's menu the pasta dish of gnocchi with chilli-spiked octopus ragu is impressive — gnocchi, of course, is more cuddly than ravioli — and the plate of sweet and sour fried chicken with pickled mustard greens and sesame another flourish of understanding what flatters what.

Locavore, the passion for ingredients that don't go in for travel, is at the heart of Alexis Noble's menu and the selection of cheeses from Wildes are, somewhat improbably, from Tottenham, although made from Jersey milk from a single herd of cows in Rye, East Sussex. London Blue — blueish — and Londonshire are accompanied by wattle seed — native to Australia — crackers.

Further cherishing of the homeland is evident in the option of strawberry pavlova among the desserts, although this being Wander, Sichuan pepper is sprinkled on to bring out the fruit's flavour.

A scoop of cherry sorbet served in a little puddle of red vermouth is sublime, the ideal denouement to a spirited, brave and, by the way, extremely good-value dinner.

The bill is not sabotaged by the fascinating wine list featuring chiefly low-intervention varieties from all over, some served by the glass from £5.

Melanie, in her appraisal of Wander, invokes early-period Sally Clarke, saying she would love to see the chef and the welcoming accommodating staff in a space that merits their skills. "In the meantime, lucky Stokey."

FIVE THINGS FAY ATE THIS WEEK

- When your favourite restaurant is where you choose to celebrate your birthday. Fabulous langoustines, porchetta, vitello tonnato, risottos and more thanks to Andrea and Dorothy at Riva in Barnes. And cake (pictured).

- A second floating restaurant from The London Shell Co, The Grand Duchess stays moored on the Grand Union Canal at Paddington Basin. "Have your hake and eat it," they say, but I choose tranche of turbot.

- Not sure that papas arrugadas (wrinkly Canary Island potatoes) and



- seaweed are best bedfellows for crab at Isla, the ground floor restaurant of The Standard hotel in King's Cross. Love the library though.

- Sweetcorn ravioli with girolles and nasturtium is the standout pasta we try at the new 10 Heddon Street (formerly Magpie).

- Chilled tofu with preserved egg and spring onion is texturally mind-blowing at Oriental Dragon in Fitzrovia.

FAY'S FAVOURITES WIZARDS FROM OZ

Skye Gyngell

The precepts of Petersham Nurseries stay with this agile, gifted, dedicated, Sydney-born chef. Spring, Somerset House, WC2. springrestaurant.co.uk

Brett Graham

He started in Newcastle, Australia, at 15 working in a fish restaurant. Now he's hit the gastro heights. The Ledbury, 127 Ledbury Road, W11. theledbury.com

Roxy Beaujolais

A consummate publican, from Adelaide to behind The Royal Courts of Justice via Soho. The Seven Stars, 53 Carey Street, WC2. thesevenstars1602.co.uk