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LUXE *for* LESS

In 2023, customers are looking to dip in to fine-diners a little more lightly. ALEXANDRA CARLTON and LARISSA DUBECKI share how to experience the best of Sydney and Melbourne for less.

The best restaurateurs are excellent at reading the moment; giving the people what they want even before they want it. And this point in time belongs to tighter budgets. This reality bites hard as corporate entertainment spends are capped and cost of living increases.

Of course, classic three-course meals and dégustations will always have their place, but increasingly, diners are looking for more entry points to the establishments they love. They want snacks at the bar, set lunch menus, and generous golden hours.

They want it with finesse, knowing the cash they are parting with is money well spent. As ever, hospitality is about being hospitable and some of Sydney and Melbourne's best industry minds are tailoring their menus to oblige.

As Tristan Rosier, founder of Jane in Surry Hills, explains, it's about finding creative ways to offer great value so that "people want to keep coming back". And at \$2 an oyster, surely, we will.

If this is the winter of democratic fine dining, book us in for an express table or a seat at the bar. >



Jack Creek steak and fries from the Lunch To Late menu at The Charles Bar in Sydney. Opposite: the dining room at Entrecote in Prahran.

MELBOURNE

From left: the dining room at Entrecote; snacks at Etta.

LUNCH SPECIALS AND SET MENUS

Etta

The wave-making East Brunswick bistro's new Saturday lunch service offers a relaxed way to experience the killer combo of Rosheen Kaul's food and Hannah Green's service smarts. Expect seafood towers with a Southeast Asian bent – grilled arrow squid skewers with lemon balm and calamansi lime sauce, and king prawns in fermented chilli butter – plus its spiritual soulmate, Champagne. ettadining.com.au

Society

A democratic peek into one of Melbourne's most glamorous – and expensive – fine-dining restaurants, the Society Social lavish lunchtime set-price menu is not short of theatrics. It kicks off with crudites and the next-level house-made bread and butter, follows it with a dazzling selection of snacks and a main and reaches a fitting crescendo with a dessert trolley manned by white-gloved waiters. societyrestaurant.com

Entrecote

If your heart belongs in Paris (and whose doesn't?), book a ticket for south-of-the-river darling Entrecote's two- or three-course prix fixe menu. Including the likes of chicken and mushroom pâté en croûte and onion soup with extravagant Gruyère croûtons, it's a flurry of Gallic charm enjoyed amid a fit-out conjuring fin de siècle France. entrecote.com.au



Ides

Lazy Sundays are most definitely a thing at Peter Gunn's bijou finer-diner Ides. Changing weekly, the five-course One Day Sunday set menu is tailor-made for a late lunch or early dinner – or why not segue from one to the other with the help of a killer wine list that leans into minimal-intervention, biodynamic labels from across the globe? idesmelbourne.com.au

Saint Hotel

New southside hotspot Saint Hotel is casting a lunchtime lure with its \$45 express lunch. Based heavily on the showpiece Jospier wood grill, it delivers two courses with bread and dip followed by a choice of steak, salade niçoise or vegetarian pasta with fries and salad. They'll even throw in a drink. sainthotel.com.au

Centonove

Private school belt favourite Centonove has won the hearts of locals over the past 25 years with its confidently luxe Italian food, and its prix-fixe menus are the cherry on the panna cotta. Tuesday to Saturday lunches offer a particularly wallet-friendly two courses for \$79 from the à la carte menu – just don't forget school pick-up. centonove.com.au

PHOTOGRAPHY ANNIKA KAFCALOUDIS (ETTA) & BRAHMAN PERERA (ENTRECOTE).

PHOTOGRAPHY KRISTOFFER PAULSEN (JAYDA) & ALEX SQUADRITO (ESTELLE).



GOLDEN HOURS

Henry Sugar

Get shucked at cosy Carlton North bolthole Henry Sugar, where oyster happy hour features \$2 bivalves every evening from 5pm to 6pm. For an extra 50 cents each you can have the premium Sydney rock oysters anointed with condiments such as fermented green chilli mignonette, Davidson plum granita or buttermilk and dill. henrysugar.com.au

Pope Joan

An elegant haven tucked inside the Sofitel forecourt gets the city office worker crowd primed for the weekend with its Friday happy hour. Kicking off at 3pm and partying until 6pm, it's all about civilised imbibing: think \$10 G&Ts, wine and prosecco, as well as some grand cru bottle bargains. popejoancity.com

Sig. Enzo

Trust an Italian aperitivo bar to celebrate happy hour in style. Each Saturday from 3pm, \$25 buys you two hours of chichetti (Italian snacks including salumi, bread and dip laid out for everyone to share) along with spritzes, wine or beer. They'll even throw in the Italian tunes for free.

Botanical Hotel

Even the well-heeled residents of South Yarra love a happy hour bargain. Their favourite clubhouse, the legendary Bot, is the scene of happy hour revelry every Sunday to Thursday from 4pm to 7pm, with \$8 wines and Carlton Draught plus \$12 Venetian Spritzes, \$15 Negronis and \$17 Pol Roger Brut to really perk things up. botanicalhotel.com.au

Le Bon Ton

Head down Louisiana way, metaphorically speaking, at this hipster-certified New Orleans-styled smokehouse, with happy hour \$12 Hurricane cocktails featuring white and dark rum rubbing shoulders with pineapple, passionfruit, lime and bitters. Celebrated every day from 4pm to 6pm, happy hour extends its generosity to selected beer and wine. lebonton.com.au

BAR MENUS

Jayda

Shane Delia's Middle Eastern flagship restaurant Maha turns 15 this year – perfect timing to welcome bar Jayda next door. Rocking a 1960s Beirut-meets-New York vibe, the glamorous digs are home to Levantine-accented cocktails such as the Strawberry Cream Negroni and a list of bar snacks that read like a full meal, from the ethereal beauty of cured kingfish and taramasalata tarts to the gutsy post-midnight appeal of the pastry-wrapped lamb shoulder with dipping jus. barjayda.com.au

Navi Lounge

It takes time to score a seat at Julian Hills' Yarraville fine-diner, but the arrival of Navi Lounge next door has thrown open the doors of spontaneity. Joined to the dining room through an archway, the little sibling has expanded the Navi repertoire into a moody-hued bar with next-level cocktails (ever had a Martini made with salted caper leaf vermouth and cod fat vodka?) and high-flying snacks that might even give a sneak peek at Navi dishes in the making. restaurantnavi.com.au

Estelle

Ignore the dressed-up couples in the low-lit dining room and take a seat in the conjoined wine bar. Here Scott Pickett delivers a commitment-free, reward-heavy retinue of snacks – braised lamb croquettes with harissa mayo, puffed beef tendons with faux bacon and pickled calamari in tomato fondue – exerting their own gravitational pull, alongside cocktails and a killer wine list. theestelle.com.au

Cutler & Co

Second string but not second fiddle, the vibrant bar at Andrew McConnell's Fitzroy fine-diner is a destination unto itself. Overlooking the kinetic energy of the impressive kitchen, it's a place to park yourself for the signature burger and dazzling array of seafood, including the comfort of spanner crab on toast to an indulgent chilled platter. cutlerandco.com.au

Stokebar

The "relaxed fine dining" of St Kilda's Stokehouse becomes even more chilled at its adjoining bar. Primed to enjoy the dazzle of the beach and the bay, the chic bar and terrace is the place for punchy snacks and caviar bumps, backed by a list of cocktails with the dial set to artisanal. stokehouse.com.au ●



Clockwise from top left: happy hour at Le Bon Ton; drinks and snacks at Scott Pickett's The Estelle; cocktail hour at Jayda.