

SIMPLY TASMANIAN EAST COAST

By Tony Walker

When John T Bailey went to work for Lactos as executive chef, I thought that's the last we'll see of him in a restaurant kitchen. After all, a life touring Australia and Asia doing demonstration, representing Tasmania on trade missions and working as guest chef in hotels like Raffles in Singapore sounded like a pretty good deal to me.

But John found he missed the basic cooking - the connection between a chef and his customers. This has led him to Swansea on the East Coast where, after a year of running the Left Bank Cafe, he and his wife Lee have opened the stylish new restaurant, The Banc. Not surprisingly, given John's background and experience, it's very good indeed.

The food clearly reflects that background - the classical training at London's Dorchester Hotel, his expertise working with game meats and the knowledge acquired during his many trips to Asia all come together to make this a very special cuisine. The room is attractive and quality is evident in everything from the glassware to the fresh flowers on the tables.

One of the things that attracted the Baileys to the East Coast was the opportunity to work with quality seafood, so we started with freshly-shucked oysters from Little Swanport, just 20 minutes down the road, accompanied by a crisp Tasmanian Riesling.

The entree was a seafood platter called Simply Tasmanian East Coast. This was a great example of the John T Bailey philosophy - simple, fresh, regional cuisine with flavours that enhance rather than obscure the key ingredients of each dish. The baby green lip abalone (\$6 each) was sensational - slow cooked in its own juices under a vacuum seal with a little ginger, garlic, mirin and lime juice, the flavour and texture were extraordinary. I also loved the local blue mussels in a Thai style broth - the mussels were same-day fresh, soft and succulent and the spicy broth had us all drinking from our bowls.

The home cured ocean trout was superb and the Spring Bay scallops chervice (4 for \$12), plump morsels simply marinated in lime juice, were equally good. Moving on to mains, my Constant Companion ordered duck confit (\$28), meltingly tender duck legs served with caramelised red cabbage, roasted bintje potatoes and a cumquat sauce which had a lovely marmalade bite to it. I was able to taste the fillet of blue eyed trevalla (\$27), beautifully fresh and firm, served with potato gratin, a green salad and lemon aioli.

My main course was venison steak (\$30), grilled rare exactly as ordered and served with potato rosti and roasted quince. The venison was sensational - very tender and great flavour, but while I also loved the roasted quince, the combination of the two didn't really work for me. It was the only miss in a night of wonderful food.

The Banc dessert sampler (15) is a great idea - small servings of three current desserts - in our case an apple and berry crumble, a fresh lime panna cotta with citrus sauce and a positively decadent Anvers rich chocolate pudding. The three dishes provided an interesting and well constructed contrast of textures and flavours.

Lee Bailey controls the front of house with friendly efficiency and nothing is too much trouble - a couple of non-oyster eaters (strange people indeed) were provided with some delicate mushroom risotto cakes as an alternative starter. The wine list is modest but well chosen and very well priced - half the list is under \$30 - and there is of course a strong East Coast presence.

John T Bailey's cuisine is emphatically regional - he is a great supporter of local producers - 90 per cent of the restaurant's produce is supplied from the East Coast.

One example is locally grown wagyu beef eye fillet - superb steak that would set you back \$50 in most restaurants; on the Banc menu it's \$33.

John T. Bailey cooks with real assurance and his style is a perfect example of the three S's in great cooking: simplicity, synergy and sensuality. The spotlight is clearly on the main ingredient, with the accompaniments chosen to complement and build those flavours.

It's my kind of cooking and we'll be back.