

Style & substance

FOOD ROB BROADFIELD



IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT AN ARCHITECT gets a brief to design a restaurant from the ground up. Most restaurants are carved out of existing commercial or retail buildings. It's even more rare when the brief begins with something like: "You know Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion? Build that, sort of."

That was the genesis of The Studio Bistro restaurant, built in a paddock on a back block in the Yallingup hills of the Margaret River region.

The Barcelona Pavilion is the most important building in the modernist canon. It was built in 1929 and, 87 years later, it hasn't dated. It remains utterly contemporary. Which may explain, in part, why The Studio Bistro looks as fresh as the day it was commissioned, despite much change inside the building. As of last year it has new owners, a new chef, an entirely new Asian-ish menu and a more approachable offer.

Like van der Rohe's design, chef Malcom Chow has given his menu clean lines, restrained design and simple, powerful execution, as you would expect from a bloke who did his apprenticeship at Shannon Bennett's Vue de Monde and cooked at Tetsuya's in Sydney.

The vegetarian dishes on Chow's menu are as sound as the meat and fish plates. A \$19 entree of king oyster and shitake mushrooms with pickled radish and a 62C egg was a clean rendition of big flavours. The mushrooms were rich and beefy; the egg had the telltale sous-vide texture of fudgy yolk and cooked but unset white; there was bitter crunch from a scattering of frisee leaves and a mildly tart smack in the mouth from thin slices of artfully strewn radish slices. Simple, pretty and well executed.

Steamed scallop dumplings, \$17, are advertised as one of the four signature dishes on the menu. They were gyoza-style

dumplings but without the pot-sticker fried base. The filling was chunky and big on flavour but there was less than a teaspoon of it in the wrapper. Two of the four dumplings had not been sealed properly and had split, making the filling waterlogged. For all that though, it was a banging dish of immense flavour, helped by its bath of chilli oil and chopped green onion.

Black bean beef rib, \$22, was from the "small" section of the menu. There was nothing small about it. Next to the spinalis dorsi (the thin muscle at the bottom of the rib eye), meat from a cow's rib cage is one of the tastiest cuts on the beast. The kitchen had cooked in long and slow as one should, but held the cooking well short of falling apart. It had texture and, yes, it was slightly stringy — big muscle fibres will do that — but it was spot-on for this Asian-inspired plate. A pickled kohlrabi garnish sliced through the fatty richness with precision. Again, simple stuff but well thought through and expertly cooked.

We headed off to the "large" part of the menu.

Spiced Xinjiang carrots, \$29, was a zeitgeist dish combining the two vegetables du jour, heritage carrots in various hues and cauliflower sliced thickly and grilled. Boom! Job done. It was the only dish on the menu we considered too expensive for what was on the plate but you couldn't fault its flavour and texture and sheer swoon-worthy. The vegetables had been roasted, charred a little and were nicely soft, where it matters. There is nothing worse than crunchy cauliflower — it has to be cooked well, and it was.

Fish of the day, market price \$39 on this occasion, was centred around a cracking good piece of Point Samson-caught Rankin cod, simply grilled and then — wait for it, XO sauce fans — anointed with an XO-scented fish stock and scattered here and there with the buttery Cloudy Bay clams and wilted bean shoots. Chef Chow may be a young fella but he's old-school when it comes to making his XO sauce. He uses jamon — as he should, but many don't — in this pungent Hong Kong chilli sauce.

The wine list is spot-on with 300 titles, of which about 60 per cent are from Margaret River.

The Studio Bistro deserves its rave reviews. The good news for the new owners is that the changes to the menu and the offer have not affected its popularity. The restaurant gets hammered on weekends and is busy most other times. Put The Studio Bistro on your "must do" list for Margaret River. **15**

Restrained design and simple, powerful execution.



PICTURES ROB BROADFIELD

The Studio Bistro
7 Marrinup Road, Yallingup 9756 6164,
thestudiobistro.com.au

OPEN

Lunch, Wednesday-Monday (from 10am); dinner, Friday-Saturday.

PRICES

Small/share plates	\$8-\$23
Large/main plates	\$29-\$44
Sides	\$7-\$11
Dessert	\$16-\$18

THE BUZZ

Laid-back class and so Margaret River. It may be casual but the food, the service and the room are polished and agreeable. You'll come for lunch and spend the afternoon.

1-9 Don't bother **10-11** Patchy **12-13** Good
14 Recommended **15-16** Very Good **17** Memorable
18-19 Classic **20** Perfection

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