

Dishing Up the World in Melbourne

Ethnic cuisines spice up this Aussie city that's home to more than 100 nationalities

By KIM ZETTER

MELBOURNE, Australia—Sydney and Melbourne have long been rivals in everything from business and culture to weather and sports. Sydneysiders crack that the only good thing to come out of Melbourne is the Hume Highway exiting town. Melburnians point out that the same highway, which connects the two cities, also comes out of Sydney.

But if the two cities didn't have enough toicker about already, they now can add food to the list.

Food is a national obsession in Australia, and the talent of some of the nation's chefs has put the island continent on the culinary map.

The trend began in Sydney in the '80s with world-class results, but Melbourne is trying to grab the baton. The number of food festivals, markets and restaurants in the city attests to its fixation.

But the real surprise is not the gourmet offerings of this former culinary wasteland; it's the variety of its ethnic cuisines.

Housing a mix of more than 100 nationalities, the city has food and flavors to match. And it's all set against a Victorian backdrop of manicured gardens, turn-of-the-century trams and houses adorned with intricate iron lace balconies.

With 2,500 restaurants in Melbourne, you'll find everything from Balinese to Lebanese, Fijian to Greek, along with a generous helping of modern Australian (a fusion of local produce and foreign spices using classic French, Italian and Asian cooking techniques).

Even better for Americans is the value, since the Aussie dollar is worth only about 56 U.S. cents.

When I spent four weeks with friends in Melbourne in February, I had just been laid off from a job, so the prospect of inexpensive eats was appealing. And coming from San Francisco, where the ethnic offerings are not always as varied as you would expect, I was interested in trying a range of flavors.

My first stop, though, was a conventional one. Lygon Street is the city's version of Little Italy, packed with family-run restaurants serving heavily sauced tourist fare.

Immigration waves, following relaxation of the White Australia policy after World War II (it wasn't completely abandoned until the 1970s), have deposited a number of other ethnic enclaves around the city: Little Saigon on Victoria Street in Richmond; Chinatown in the CBD (Central Business District); the Greek section of Lonsdale Street; the Ottoman Empire (Turks and Lebanese) on Sydney Road in Brunswick; and Bollywood (Indian) in Dandenong. Not to mention the burgeoning industrial neighborhood of Footscray, home to Vietnamese and Ethiopians.

As I walked down Lygon weaving a path around waiters and pedestrians, an Italian barker cooed softly from his doorway perch. "Ciao, bella," he said, gesturing toward an empty pavement table that apparently had my name on it.

But on this hot summer night, passing the gantlet of restaurant hawkers, all I wanted was gelato. I found my treasure at Casa del Gelato, a *gelateria* with the warmth of a neighborhood pub. Standing on the corner and scooping the cool, creamy mounds from a cone—peach and ricotta, two specialty flavors of Casa del Gelato owner Ottorino Pace—I could smell the thick aroma of toasty espresso and sautéed garlic in the air.

The capital of the state of Victoria, Melbourne was founded by John Batman in 1835 as a British outpost and purchased for a pittance from Aborigines who made their home on the mud flats of the Yarra River. Named after Lord Melbourne, Britain's prime minister from 1835 to '41, it was Australia's capital from 1901 to 1927, before Parliament moved to Canberra. Despite Sydney's iconic opera house, Melbourne, with 3.2 million residents, stakes a strong claim to being the country's intellectual and artistic hub. Add to this its numerous parks, relaxed attitude and multicultural edge, and it's easy to see why so many immigrants prefer it to Sydney.

And Melbourne has many other attractions beyond its food. Moonlight Cinema, in the city's 157-year-old Royal Botanic Garden alongside the Yarra River, is a great mix of bucolic setting and celluloid classics. The city is also mad for sports. If the townies aren't gearing

up for the Australian Open tennis tournament or Australian Formula One Grand Prix—a loud spectacle that runs through town—then foosy (Australian Rules football), bike riding, sailing and golf consume them.

Outside Melbourne, the countryside offers spectacular views along the Great Ocean Road, which rivals Highway 1 in California. Or you can take bicycle tours of the country's renowned Yarra Valley wineries; swim and surf along the Mornington Peninsula; take a day trip to Phillip Island to see the nightly parade of waddling penguins as they emerge from the sea; or observe other pudgy critters at the Koala Conservation Centre.

Following my brief Italian sojourn on Lygon, my friend Paul and I decided to head to the city center for Greek food. Melbourne is said to have the largest Greek population outside Athens. Feeding these Mediterranean appetites is a host of restaurants ranging from traditional tavernas serving souvlakia and *saganaki* to more modern venues mixing it up with kangaroo and octopus.

One of the best Greek restaurants is Kri Kri Mezezhopoleion. Named after a type of endangered goat on the island of Crete, Kri Kri bravely infiltrated Chinatown a couple of years ago and has been holding its own among the dim sum establishments ever since.

Mezezhopoleion ("the place for small dishes") refers to *meze*, *tapas*-style items that let you sample many flavors. At Kri Kri we had a mini feast: a creamy fava bean puree and a deliciously chewy *saganaki* (cheese coated in flour and fried), followed by zucchini fritters, tender lamb cutlets and eggplant with spicy olives and feta. *Loukoumades* (honeyed fritters with walnuts) completed the meal.

Speaking of dim sum, no culinary experience in Melbourne would be complete without this Chinese tradition. So one morning I headed to the banks of the Yarra. The city is filled with Chinese restaurants offering *yum cha* ("drink tea") sessions, generally between 11 a.m. and 3 p.m. But Red Emperor, with its split-level dining room and beautiful river views, is one of the best.

I arrived early and watched as dozens of bamboo baskets rolled from the kitchen. The trick was to resist filling up on satay and spring rolls early in the game, to save room for the prawn dumplings and pork buns that came later.

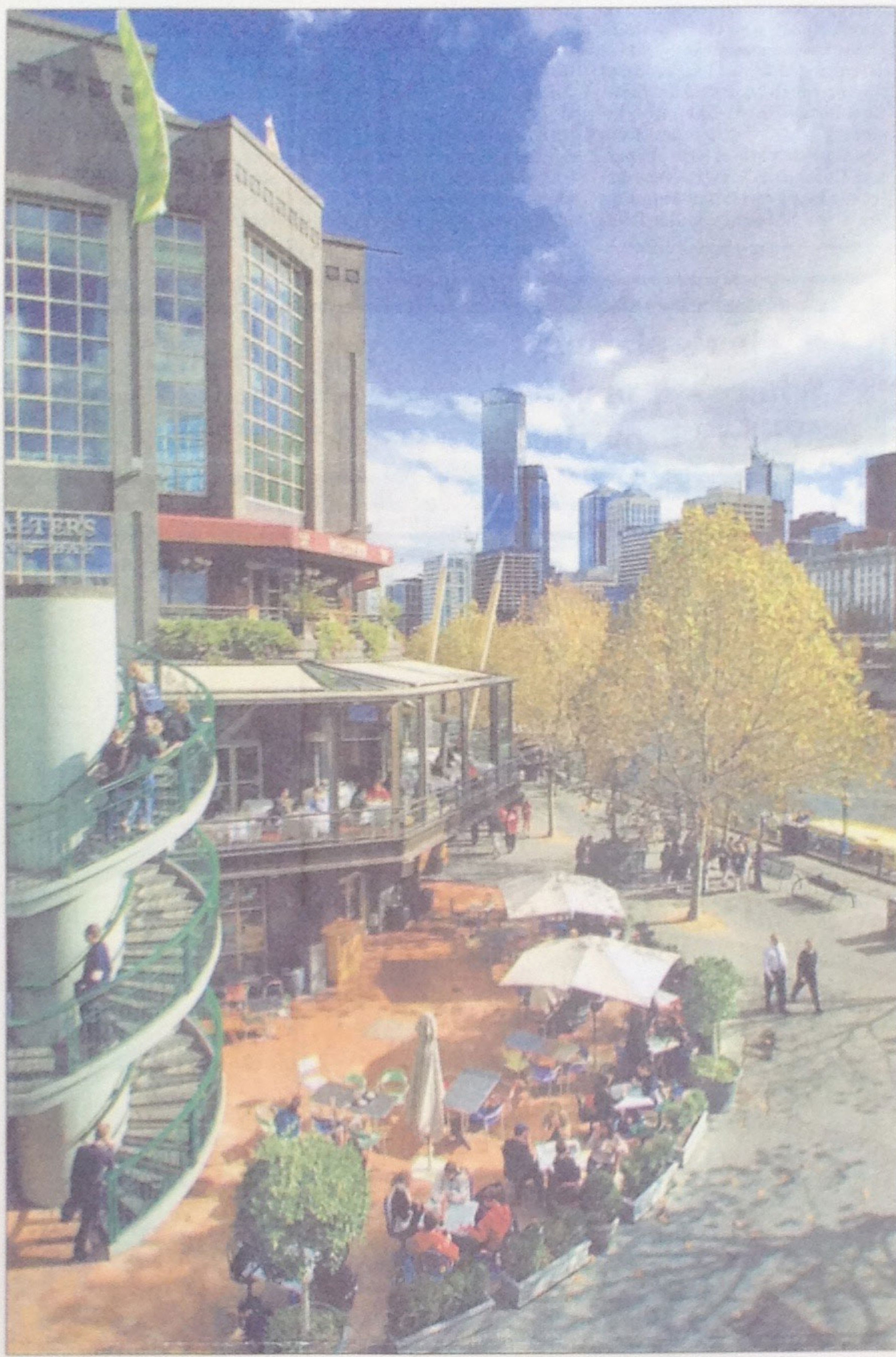
Thanks to Australia's South Pacific location, a world of exotic ingredients fills its menus and stores. At an Asian market on Victoria Street, I found tapioca sticks and hard brown rounds of palm sugar twice the size of a hockey puck. There were also dried fish lips and mussels in plastic bags. Produce markets are stocked with unusual tropical fare, too: breadfruit, purple passion fruit and plump, red, succulent dragon pearl fruit. There's also durian, which reportedly "tastes like heaven and stinks like hell." The fruit has rubbery porcupine-type quills and dense, rich flesh that tastes like a cross between cream cheese and onion.

Because 90% of Australians live along a coast, there is also an abundance of interesting and fresh seafood, such as barramundi fish, Balmain bugs (like lobster), parrotfish, eel, Queensland mud crab, yabbies (freshwater crayfish) and blue swimmer crabs.

For my next culinary venture, I decided to go Balinese. I visited Warung Agus. A *warung*, in Bali, is a casual place where neighbors gather to gossip and eat. The restaurant fits this description and at the same time is an oasis of color and warmth in a gray part of town. Consisting of two small rooms adorned with bright fabrics and handicrafts, the family-owned venue is redolent of spices and tropical flowers.

My friend Jackie and I began with a platter of perfectly cooked calamari. Then we tried *biri biri panggang* (juicy lamb in a fragrant tamarind and palm sugar sauce) and quail stuffed with lemongrass, candlenut and ginger. All the while, a steady stream of the house specialty floated by our table—fish fillets baked in foil, seasoned with lemon and a mix of spices.

Staying in the same culinary region, I went a few nights later to Lemongrass, an upscale restaurant that features Thai royal cuisine. This type of food is time consuming to prepare, requiring that each dish look as artful as it tastes. Lemongrass meets this requirement with impressive results, but

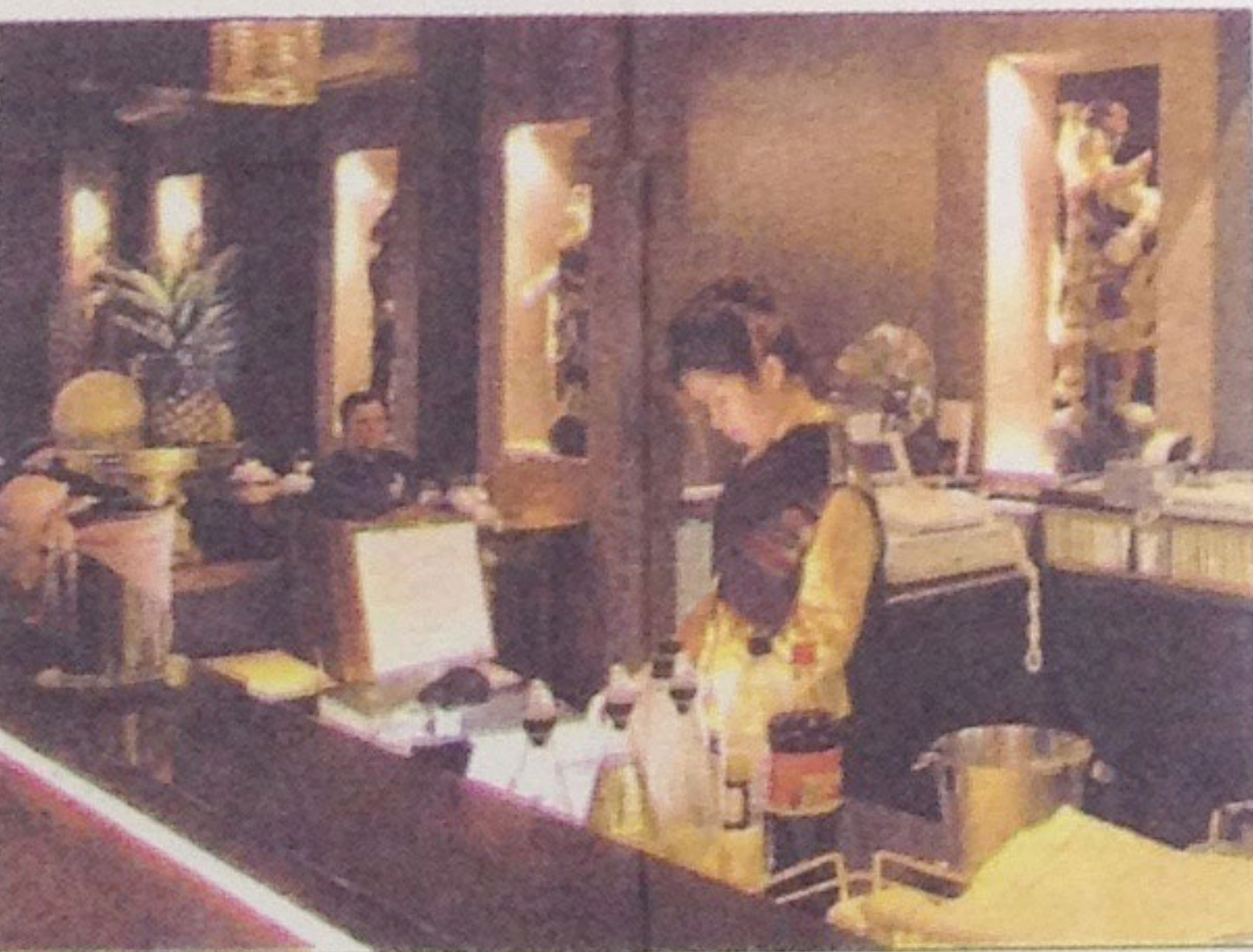


Photos by MARINA OLIPHANT/For The Times

Southgate, a shopping and dining complex on the Yarra River, is part of the city's vibrant restaurant scene.



It's a full house for Saturday dinner at Lemongrass, an upscale establishment that showcases the artfully prepared royal cuisine of Thailand—though the restaurant is on Lygon Street, the city's Little Italy.



Adorned with examples of traditional handicrafts, family-owned Warung Agus in the Richmond area serves exotically spiced Balinese fare.

the royal treatment can be pricey (\$22 for a scampi dish).

Paul and I ordered *mieng kanah*, a dish consisting of fresh *kai lan* leaves that diners layer with toasted coconut, cashews, lime wedges, pomelo and ginger and drizzle with a palm sugar and shrimp paste sauce before wrapping and eating. Each bite delivered a burst of sweet, sour and bitter flavors and a mix of textures.

Having eaten my fill of Asian food, I turned to the Middle East in

search of the perfect tabbouleh. I found it at Abla's.

Abla is Abla Amad, owner of a 20-year-old landmark and author of "The Lebanese Kitchen." Her fresh, light tabbouleh set everything right in the world. In fact, she has gone on record as saying the cracked wheat salad has the same restorative powers as chicken soup. She's also known for a sweet chicken and rice dish with almonds and spice. And don't leave her dining room without trying

Guidebook: Breaking Bread in Melbourne

• **Getting there:** Qantas flies nonstop from Los Angeles to Melbourne. Air New Zealand, Qantas and United have connecting flights. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$1,148.

• **Telephones:** To call the numbers below from the U.S., dial 011 (the international dialing code), 61 (country code for Australia), 3 (city code for Melbourne) and the local number.

• **Where to eat:** Balinese: Warung Agus, 305 Victoria St., West Melbourne; 9329-1737.

Chinese: Flower Drum, 17 Market Lane; 9662-3655. A local institution and a favorite of celebrities and politicians, Flower Drum is pricey and very hard to book.

Red Emperor, 3 Southgate Ave., Upper Level, Southbank; 9699-4170.

Greek: Kri Kri Mezezhopoleion, 39-41 Little Bourke St.; 9639-3444.

Piraeus Blues, 310 Brunswick St., Fitzroy; 9417-0222. Traditional Greek dishes, with a few surprises. Try the fricassee lamb with artichokes.

Indonesian: Warung Batavia, 274 Park St., South Melbourne; 9686-0588. Teak tables and chairs and

Javanese masks set the stage for tropical delights like banana fritters, served in a banana leaf with ice cream.

Italian: Casa del Gelato, 163 Lygon St., Carlton; 9347-0220. Creamy gelato.

Zia Teresa, 90 Lygon St., Brunswick; 9380-1218.

Everyone should experience at least one meal on high-energy, touristy Lygon Street, even if the pastas are heavily sauced.

Try the house specialty of capretto.

Lebanese: Abla's, 109 Egin St., Carlton; 9347-0006.

Popular; book well in advance.

Nepalese: Gurkha's Brasserie, 190-192 Chapel St., Prahran; 9610-3325. Spicy fare at this restaurant, which is run by two Nepalese brothers.

Thai: Lemongrass Thai Royal Cuisine, 176 Lygon St., Carlton; 9662-2244. Pricey but delicious foods.

Turkish: Kilim Turkish Restaurant, 366 Victoria St., Richmond; 9428-5982. Tents, kilim-covered walls and exotic Middle Eastern dishes.

Vietnamese: Pacific Seafood BBQ House, 8/240 Victoria St., Richmond; 9427-8225.

Choose your fish, and your waiter will net it from the fish shop next door. Best bets:

jade perch steamed with ginger and soy; salt and garlic prawns; deep-fried flounder with garlic and chili.

Thanh Phong, 7/240 Victoria St., Richmond; 9427-7429.

The savory rice noodle soup (with sliced pork, minced shrimp and lemongrass in a tomato broth) is filling and satisfying for lunch.

Quan 88, 88 Victoria St., Richmond; 9428-8850. Known for its spicy quail, Quan 88 serves up more than 500 birds a week, marinated in garlic, onion, lemongrass, soy and oyster sauces, then barbecued until crisp.

Note on wine: Restaurants in Australia are either licensed or unlicensed (meaning they don't serve alcohol). Many of them are BYO, with a corkage fee of \$1-\$4. You can find a wine shop within a block of most restaurants.

• **For more information:** Australian Tourist Commission, 2049 Century Park East, Suite 1920, Los Angeles, CA 90067; (800) 369-6863, fax (661) 775-4448, www.australia.com.



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kibbeh nayeh, a Lebanese version of steak tartare.

Middle Eastern food is popular in Melbourne, so on my last night I went with friends to Kilim Turkish Restaurant, another relaxed place with tented interior, kilim-covered walls and embroidered pillows.

We ordered the *meze* platter with seven savory, colorful dips, including the piquant *pancar* (mashed beets, yogurt and garlic) and *biber* (red pepper, yogurt and garlic) served with fingers of *pide*, a soft, focaccia-like bread. Then we tried chili mussels in white wine, and *iskender*—thin strips of grilled lamb tossed with seasoned tomato

chunks and cool garlic yogurt laid over crunchy bread. Each bite was smoky and tart.

Hours later, as we closed the restaurant, I thought back over my whirlwind culinary war. I was, as they say Down Under, one happy little Vegemite.

Kim Zetter is the author of *Lonely Planet's "Out to Eat—San Francisco 2001" restaurant guide*.