

MY DEAR *James*...

Words by Heloise Garrity
Photography by Andre Rowell

Tucked away in Auckland's oldest suburb at the foot of Stanley Street and Parnell Rise just a stone's throw from the history-steeped Strand Hotel, resides one of Auckland's newest culinary experiences, James, the brainchild of catering heavyweights, Jamie Miller and Gisele Trezevant-Miller of Mint Kitchen. You would think that a space fronting one of the busiest arterial junctions in Auckland's CBD would struggle to compete with the traffic, however, the solid, retrofitted concrete structure, which once housed a steel mill on the shores of what used to be Mechanics Bay, effectively cocoons the restaurant, capitalising even on the incessant hustle and bustle just beyond.

Inside, the honest, simple materials of the architecture, discretely renovated and modernised by Richard Naish from RTA Studio, are left exposed. The brickwork paired with the soaring multi-paned wood window frames, the original double-height columns stamped with the grain of the wood slats between which they were poured, and the concrete floors still containing fragments of shell from the original bay, reinforce a sense of history in the space.

Whilst the aged surfaces entice you to ponder the history behind them – so do the presence of four stunning antique candle chandeliers, some 200 years old, which might once have graced the lobby of some grand Parisian hotel or hung from a coffered ceiling of an opulent Italian palazzo. Realised with Tom Rowe from Noel Lane Architects, the old world elements of the interior design are beautifully married with the contemporary. The openness of the grand yet intimate space is preserved by forgoing the use of permanent partitions; instead circulation is rendered fluid with the introduction of a series of full-height, flowing scarlet curtains. The soft division of space achieved offers a relaxed level of privacy and intimacy to suit but without completely isolating and blocking out fellow diners or the elegant ambiance of the restaurant. Unobtrusive, transparent chairs await, falling into relief and ushering the focus away from their function to the fine food and beverage choices to be made. “It’s not about the chair,” says Gisele, “They disappear; it becomes more about the person sitting in the chair and what they want.”

Complementing the fluid, ethereal chairs reflecting the light and radiating it around the space, the double-height, multi-paned windows dressed with sheer, gauzy curtains elegantly soften and diffuse the light, giving the restaurant a warm, delicate ambience. The overall result is open, airy and richly textured. “This place is very much about light and what it does to your mood and tastebuds,” says Gisele, “We’ve gilded the lily; we’ve just added accents and definitely played with the light.”

When it comes to the menu, refreshingly, there’s no need to think in the “A, B, C” of courses. The straightforward Mediterranean-inspired menu doesn’t follow the usual shape of starters and main courses but instead, simply lists small, medium, large and sweet plates, some of which could be a starter, some of which could be a main course, and some of which can be had as either.

“It is what it is,” says Jamie, “You don’t have to sit down and deconstruct it.” Ultimately, all the dishes are designed to be shared, allowing diners the chance to mix and match, experiment and try something new each time. “I think variety is the spice of life. It’s an old adage but I think it’s true,” says Gisele. “[At James,] you’ve got access to a sound – or a ‘mouth’ – bite of the very best that the world can do, and that’s why we have the small plates.”

A glance at James’ extensive wine list reveals just how integral a part of the dining experience they consider a top quality drop to be, with an unusually large selection of both old and new world wines from around the world offered by the glass to give diners the experience of trying something a little more off their beaten path – and without some of the hefty margins you might have come to expect when fine dining out. From a 2009 Francis Coppola Diamond Collection Red Label Zinfandel, a grape not commonly grown here, or a crisp, delicate La Gitana Manzanilla sherry by Bodegas Hidalgo, to natural wines, such as AndCo. The Supernatural Hawke’s Bay 2009 or a young and rustic organic Floral de Uncastellum 2009 from Tinto Joven, these are “accessible, quaffable, interesting wines that will open things up and take you out of your comfort zone a bit,” says Gisele. “Rather than giving people what they want, sometimes people need to be stimulated and try something outside the box.”

James is chic yet inviting, and the vibe is not stuffy (thankfully) but intimate, all of this feeding into what the crew there describes as “5-star casual” dining, blending a relaxed attitude with luxury dining artfully into one – fine food, wine and service “and you’re the casual element,” remarks Restaurant Manager, Chris Wallace. “I think we can deliver at any level,” says Gisele, “I just hope people get what they want out of it.” And the hospitality behind the discrete leather-swathed bar is no exception – in keeping with the restaurant’s underlying “everything to everyone” philosophy, whether you are pining after an old-school tippie, interested in trying something different in the way of a fine, exotic wine, sherry or port, or simply thirsty for a swig of tap beer with your dishes of choice, there is place for these alcoholic whims and more. “We let the food and wine do our talking for us,” says Chris. At James, what you see is what you get – and speak for itself it does. **M2W**



Blue Fin Tuna

INGREDIENTS:

95-100 gm blue fin tuna per skewer

ponzu – buy from Japanese market

daikon

extra virgin olive oil

METHOD:

Cut the tuna into cubes of approximately 15 to 20 grams. Skewer 5 cubes onto bamboo skewers. Heat in a pan brushed with extra virgin olive oil, and sear all sides.

Place the tuna onto a plate, pour the Ponzu to desired taste, grate the Daikon radish and place on the tuna.

Barbecued Tiger Prawns With Potato & Dill Salad

Shared plate – great for an entrée or a small plate, cook on barbecue or in a pan.

INGREDIENTS:

4 tiger prawns

1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

METHOD:

Pull the legs and shells from the prawn, starting from underneath the prawn at the head end. The shell should come off in rings. De-vein by making a shallow slit down the middle of the back to expose the black intestine. Lift out the black vein with the point of a paring knife and wipe it off on a paper towel. Rinse it out under cold, running water.

Potato & Dill Salad

INGREDIENTS:

2 potatoes

1 ½ cup aioli (garlic mayonnaise)

dill, a small bunch

METHOD:

Cut the potatoes into cubes, bring to the boil and simmer for 5 to 10 minutes. Drain the potatoes and set aside to cool thoroughly. Finely chop the dill and add to the potatoes. In a large bowl, add in the roasted garlic aioli and mix softly, taking care not to crush the potatoes. Spoon the potato salad onto a plate in a line and top with the prawns. Drizzle on lemon-flavoured olive oil and season with sea salt.



Chicken Lime Paprika Skewers

INGREDIENTS:

1 ½ chicken thighs per skewer

paprika

2 limes

METHOD:

Cut the chicken thighs into cubes, allowing 1 ½ thighs per skewer. Squeeze the juice from 2 limes. In a large mixing bowl, marinate the thighs in lime with a tablespoon of paprika. Mix well and marinate for at least 2 hours – you may marinate overnight.

TASTE MAKERS

Paella

INGREDIENTS:

2 garlic cloves per person
60 ml olive oil
1 gm saffron
1 tbsp picked thyme
400 gm calasparra or bomba rice
2 red capsicums
1 red onion
125 ml dry white wine
1250 ml chicken stock
4 chicken thighs, cut into cubes

4 chorizo sausages, sliced

6 clams

200 gm fresh fish (firm like groper)

200 gm squid, cut into 5 mm strips

6 mussels

200 gm green peas, frozen

4 prawns per person, leave the head on, peel off shell and de-vein

TO GARNISH:

2 tbsp Italian parsley

2 lemon segments per person

METHOD:

With 10 ml of oil, cook the capsicum and onion very slowly until soft. In Paella pan: heat the remaining oil and add the finely-chopped garlic and rice. Stir and lightly fry the rice for 2 minutes. Add the softened peppers and onion. Mix in the thyme and cook for a further 3 minutes. Add the white wine and bring to the boil at a medium to high heat. Add the stock and bring to the boil. From now on, do not stir. The idea is to get a nice crust on the bottom of the pan on a medium to high heat. Add the chicken thighs and chorizos, and cook for 5 minutes, then add the clams and cook for another 5 minutes. Add the fish and squid, and cook for a further 5 minutes. Place the prawns and peas on top of the rice and cook with the steam coming off the rice. Cook for another 10 minutes until all the liquid has been absorbed. Remove from the heat and cover with foil for 5 minutes. In a separate pan, steam the mussels until cooked. Arrange the mussels on the rice with wedges of lemon and chopped Italian parsley.



Braised Beef Cheek

INGREDIENTS:

6 beef cheeks	2 onions
3 tbsp olive oil	2 garlic heads
1000 ml beef stock	2 celery sticks
Salt and pepper	2 bay leaves
3 carrots	1 cup Pedro Ximenez sherry

METHOD:

Preheat the oven to 160 °C. Trim the beef cheeks. Heat the oil in a non-stick frying pan and brown the beef cheeks. Place the beef cheeks in a roasting pan. Add the carrots, onion, garlic, celery and bay leaves, and cover with the beef stock and sherry – adding a little water if necessary. Cover and cook in the oven for a minimum of 3 to 4 hours. Cook until the meat is very tender and starting to fall apart. Remove the cheeks from the stock. Reduce the stock and thicken the liquid for jus. Season to taste. Serve with carrot mash.

