

The Gorge

LAUNCESTON

writer *Fiona Stocker*



Describing a restaurant as a safe pair of hands is a damp squib of a compliment if ever there was one. So much more enlightening to liken it to the sort of friend it might be if it were human. Or better still, what kind of lover.

If The Gorge Restaurant in Launceston were a swain, it would be one to swoon for. Technically competent and occasionally inspirational, with a full service offering from the brush of a hand on the thigh under the tablecloth, to a cigarette shared companionably quite a long time later, propped up on fluffy goose down pillows against a padded bedhead in a swanky hotel.

The Gorge has been having its Casanovan way with diners for decades and like our Venetian friend is perhaps regarded as a bit long in the tooth

by some. However, such skilled and dependable hands are not to be sniffed at, especially when one is hungry.

Set in the park-like grounds of Launceston's Cataract Gorge, a spectacular natural basin in the South Esk River, the restaurant occupies the high ground on one side of the gorge, in the Cliff Grounds Reserve. It's housed in a lovely historic residence that makes one fantasise about being a Victorian lady swooshing around with a bustle. Or a gentleman in breeches and hose.

On the outside, it's classic elegance with a colonial cottage-like feel. On the interior, it's deeply classic. The scene is set the minute you step in the door, with decor which, if not heart-stopping, beats with an old-fashioned quality and charm. Tablecloths are thick and creamy, silverware is



long-serving and heavy, and the gleaming windows give out onto sylvan treetop views.

There's none of your poncy modern stemless glassware here. Wines are poured into generous goblets with a restaurant insignia heavily etched on the side. For some of us, the lighting and ambience is curiously reminiscent of the inside of a London Routemaster double-decker bus in winter – warm, cosy and golden, full of banter and chat.

If you and The Gorge have encountered one another within the past couple of years, the menu may hold few surprises for you. That said, the place has enough tricks up its sleeve to make an evening there a highly pleasurable romp.

I'm with a party of ladies for an evening out. We dine out regularly, and we demand satisfaction. We're quick to order. Soon glasses are being raised, talk is being had and our dishes arrive.

One of my companions is disappointed, but then if you order an entree as a main, disappointment is probably coming your way. In some things, size does matter, and an evening repast is one of them. The rest of us are too busy to be sympathetic, attacking our twice-cooked duck with

sticky rice, our slow-cooked beef cheeks with mash and jus and baby carrots, and our seafood steak with local scallops.

The wine list is several satisfying pages long, in a typeface from years ago. Still, it's a comprehensive tour of the region, nothing too out-of-reach premium, and brimming with quality boutiques like Holm Oak and Sharmans. To be picky, in company with tastes running from "local pinot noir bien sur" to "designated driver" to not knowing or caring as long as it's white, a couple more options by the glass would expand the repertoire.

The service is impeccably timed, obliging and personal, warmly smiley and unfailingly polite with a couple of interesting piercings. On a previous visit for a quiet weekday lunch with my Other Half, we were one of only two parties there. Nevertheless the manager, who has been there for 26 years, was generous to a fault with time, conversation and service, gracefully putting up with us moving tables (we couldn't decide between cosy fireside or sylvan views).

Since we're middle-aged females, we deny ourselves desserts. A low-carb and sugar life is an ascetic one. Too late for me, however. I've already indulged on that previous visit with my Other Half, and can vouch for the sumptuousness of the warm, chocolate hazelnut brownie, the fluffiness of the fairy floss and the velvety firmness of the panna cotta, which we fed to each other with gleeful abandon and complete disregard of the GI count.

At the close of the evening, The Gorge has excelled and is a keeper. If you set up home together and made it permanent, there's a smidgen of a chance you'd find things predictable after a few years. But there'd be no denying things were always done with a knowing assurance and a true understanding of what a hungry woman really wants.

You could depend upon your appetites always being satisfied. 🍷