

THE AGE, Tuesday 18 April 1989

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# EPICURE 5

## Gowings is just the same — top quality

**R**ESTAURANT reviewers are often criticised for reviewing a restaurant after only one visit. Two or even three visits would be fairer, we are told.

Sometimes we do that. But the difficulty is that after three visits, you start to feel at home. It is then harder to see the place afresh and clearly.

Most people read reviews to find out whether they would like to go to a restaurant for the first time, so I, as a reviewer, try to see things as they would. After all, those who go back to a restaurant for the second or fourth or ninth time have made their own decisions about the quality of the place. They do not need me to tell them whether they like it.

All this occurs to me as I write a review of Gowings, in East Melbourne. In the four years since I first reviewed the restaurant, I have been there many times — for birthdays and the grand celebrations of the Melbourne year (like Cup eve and New Year's Eve), for quick working lunches and leisurely dinners and late suppers when I have been too tired to eat much.

I have seen it through a number of chefs, and I am constantly reminded of my first impressions of it because the review I wrote is there, hanging on the wall along with other framed reviews and interviews.

Dennis Gowing, the owner, is well known throughout Melbourne. He is a highly publicised figure, which is not necessarily the best qualification for running a good restaurant.

Four years ago, I was conscious of him sitting alone at a table and I felt at the time that he set standards within the restaurant. "In the best way, Gowings is shaping up as an old-fashioned restaurant, one which is designed for the needs and preferences of its customers," I wrote. "And all credit to the solitary man at the table for that."

Over the years I have realised how firmly he has guided the restaurant. It has grown in all sorts of ways since Mr Gowing took over what had been Joyeaux, and Bim's before that. Most of all, it has taken the imprint of its owner. All good restaurants do that.

What you get at Gowings is Dennis Gowing's interest in Australian painting (there is a kind of exhibition of paintings on the walls, and they are for sale); his interest in wine; his concern for the wellbeing of diners (the waiters here have always been skilled); his insistence on good food; and — if you go there often enough — his sense of an occasion and his mercurial temper.

This is a rather formal restaurant in which people can behave less than formally. I have been there on celebratory evenings when the entire restaurant sings along together, as if everyone were in a music hall. It is a good restaurant for a celebration, and it is also a good restaurant for a row. Gowings has seen some spectacular arguments in its time.

So how do I look dispassionately at such a restaurant? Precisely because it is a familiar restaurant, I chose what should have been a difficult evening — Easter Saturday. Dennis Gowing would not be in the restaurant that evening; it was the day after a public holiday, in the middle of a holiday stretch; and no doubt because it was open dur-



Picture: RODGER CUMMINGS

Chris Wasiak serves customers in Gowings.

ing that time, it had an unexpectedly large number of diners. The evening proceeded well. A drink before dinner? Perhaps a glass of champagne? Someone at the table suggested sherry. The waiter asked if we wanted a Spanish or an Australian sherry — there was a very fine Seppeitsfeld available. A very fine Show Fino Seppeitsfeld dry sherry indeed, and this was the only restaurant out of four recently visited restaurants that offered such a fine Australian sherry.

The menu is quite large, listing two soups, half-a-dozen cold entrees and five hot entrees on the carte and three other choices for first course on the additional fixed-price menu.

At a recent luncheon at the restaurant I had eaten the soup on that menu, a rich lettuce soup with oysters, and I had also eaten the platter of pates and terrines. That plate includes a marvellous game terrine served with chef Xavier Robinson's own green tomato chutney. It is really too large an entree for me — it is an ideal light luncheon dish.

A good chef, as Xavier Robinson is, can turn out imaginative and skilfully executed dishes (the salad of hare saddle with goat's cheese, pine nuts and bitter greens was such an entree). But what about those standard dishes that food writers ignore and to which many diners are devoted? I chose the smoked Atlantic salmon.

It was just as you hope good smoked salmon will be. It came, freshly sliced, on a large white plate with the traditional accompaniments of capers (the tiniest and most delicious capers,

these) and onion (about which I have some reservation) and rounds of Melba toast, as well as a horseradish cream and a tiny salad. It is a substantial first course, as it should be for \$18.50, and its quality was as good as its presentation.

We drank a bottle of the fairly recently released David Wynn 1988 Chardonnay (\$23). The wine, which was launched at Gowings and was shown with some of David Wynn's early great wines, is not much about in restaurants. It is full of the flavor of chardonnay, without any of the dried oak, and the sort of wine that gives you an appetite for food. The wine list is very impressive, and

about as expensive as all large and well chosen wine lists are.

Our main courses were roast fillet of beef in a rich red wine sauce (\$22.50), and roast squab served with a pear and port sauce (\$25.50). Both were excellent — the beef is always notably good — and the squab was both tender and full of flavor.

The beef was accompanied by braised witloof; the squab came with an assortment of vegetables arranged decoratively on the large, rectangular plate.

The vegetables provided the only flaw in the evening. There were sugar peas, baby carrots and baby turnips. The carrots were borderline, on the firm side of al dente, and the turnips were under-cooked. Turnips are only good when they are cooked so that they are soft, and the cooking brings out the best of their flavor.

I chose an individual gateau pithiviers for dessert (\$10.50), and it was an acceptable gateau, accompanied by a light creme anglaise and a very good armagnac icecream. The problem with the cake, I suspect, was the difficulty of turning what is traditionally a large cake with an almond filling into a small cake with the same filling. Change the scale, and you change the texture. It was not as light as it might have been. But the petit fours that came with coffee were quite delicious.

Overall, it was a very fine dinner in all the ways that make a dinner worthwhile — the food, the wine, the service, the atmosphere, which is all about other people enjoying themselves too. The striking thing for me was that there was no difference at all in quality between that Easter Satur-

day dinner and any number of other meals I have eaten in the restaurant.

Other chefs have cooked rather differently. Alain Kerambrun's cooking here was quite distinct from Xavier Robinson's, but the overall quality has been unchanged; and since Xavier Robinson became chef, there has been a consistency in the cooking that is regrettably rare in restaurants. It has been consistently good over a number of menus and over a wide range of dishes.

That consistency of quality is what professionalism is all about in the restaurant industry. Owner there or not,

public holiday or not, unexpectedly busy or not, it is just the same. Good restaurant managers like Robbie Gibson must be praised for that. But I also think, as I did four years ago, that the restaurateur must finally take the credit.

**GOWINGS, 366 Albert Street, East Melbourne.**

Tel. 419 0366. Licensed. Lunch Monday-Friday from noon; Dinner Monday-Saturday from 6 pm. Seats: 80, private room. Cards: AE BC DC MC Visa. Owner: Dennis Gowing. Chef: Xavier Robinson. Price: About \$90 for two, plus drinks (less for set menus at lunch and dinner).



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By RITA ERLICH

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