

THE
TRUTH
ABOUT
FOOD



CAMM WHITEOAK &
BEN SHEWRY FROM
ATTICA RESTAURANT,
MELBOURNE
BY EMMA WESTWOOD



Offer Attica's Head Chef, Ben Shewry, the opportunity to describe his cuisine and he comes up with just one word – honest. An unassuming and humble spokesperson, Shewry then adds, "I've always struggled with that question."

"I can probably answer that," pipes up Restaurant Manager Camm Whiteoak. "I call Ben a 'produce-driven chef' who uses very modern techniques – a lot of slow cooking in terms of low temperature and longer times. He has an emotional quality to his food. A lot of his creativity comes from food as a stimulant

to emotion, wanting to use memories of taste from his past as a creative element in coming up with his dishes."

Even though Shewry – formerly of St Kilda's famed Circa – reluctantly talks up his food, Whiteoak is forthcoming with the compliments – and it appears his enthusiasm is well founded. When Shewry first came to the restaurant three and a half years ago, John Lethlean in *Australian Gourmet Traveller* was moved to call him a chef that, "is not only coming up with menus that are distinctive, with hints of Europe, Thailand and the Middle

East, but his ideas, presentation and execution show great flair, maturity and natural ability. In short, this is a guy, and a restaurant, to watch closely.”

Lethlean’s prediction was telling, and despite Attica not necessarily leaping to mind when making a roll call of the Melbourne dining scene, that may be changing. In August last year, Attica took out the much-coveted ‘Restaurant of the Year’ award in Melbourne’s culinary bible, The Age Good Food Guide 2009, and from there, the star has been rising.

“It’s essential for us to get this kind of publicity because we’re seven kilometres outside the city,” says Whiteoak of the impact of such an award. “We’re on a little suburban shopping strip and we’re not a restaurant that gets any walk-by trade at all, so that kind of recognition means we’re going to be busy, and we’re always going to be in people’s minds as a restaurant to go to. The award came at just the right time last year for us.”

Seating just 55 people, Attica was bombarded with over 100 voicemail booking requests once the award was announced. Considering

the financial crisis kicked in only a month later, Whiteoak and Shewry are part of an elite few who can honestly say they haven’t felt the impact of these tough economic times.

“People might be dining out only once a fortnight or once a month now,” explains Whiteoak. “But when they do that, they really want to make it a great time and forget about the problems that are going on. We also offer great value for money for what we do, so the average spend might go up, but that’s because, rather than us charging \$300 for an eight-course menu, we’re charging \$130, which means people think, ‘OK, then I can afford to spend a bit more on a really good bottle of wine’.”

The eight-course menu of which Whiteoak refers is Attica’s Tasting Menu – a mouth-watering array of surf and turf, from dishes such as beef in ash, abalone, tamarind and egg yolk, and John Dory in brown butter, white asparagus, mojama and baby squid. The Tasting Menu also boasts a dish The Age Good Food Guide 2009 crowned as their ‘Dish of the Year’ – smoked trout broth, crackling, basil seeds and fresh smoke.

“That particular dish is something that goes beyond just looking good and tasting delicious,” admits Whiteoak. “There is sound that comes with it, and it smells of smoke as well. It’s something that’s really theatrical and pushes the boundary, but the end result is delicious too. It’s just a well-balanced dish.”

An audible dish? When pressed to explain, Shewry and Whiteoak explain the inclusion of crackling creates the sound component. As the hot trout broth is poured over the plate, it crackles – quite literally, a snap, crackle and pop sensation.

Given the type of free reign (and pride) these two men hold over Attica, you’d assume they





share proprietorship of the restaurant as well. Not so. Attica's owner is David Maccora, an emergency doctor at a Melbourne hospital who is happy to allow the professionals under his employ dictate the direction of his valuable investment.

"He's the most calm, level-headed person I've had to work for," says Whiteoak. "He never dictated to Ben at all what kind of food he should be serving. Ben is such a professional person, though. There's none of the mucking around that you can get at other places. We take what we do very seriously. The people that come to work here enjoy working here because they want to work in that kind of environment as well."

One look around Attica doesn't scream 'award-winning restaurant'. Predominantly swathed in timber with neutral colour tones and the obligatory white linen tablecloths – while tasteful and elegant – there's nothing in terms of interior design that is going to define Attica from the throng. But that said, such an

understated appearance seems to complement Shewry's approach.

"Sometimes I think of it as a restaurant in a raw state, like it's pared back somehow," surmises Shewry. "You've got all the basics, but they're done really well. I'm not saying that it's simple... it's not. I just think the restaurant is quite direct. The food is prepared in a knowledgeable way – knowing where the foods have come from. All that information is there for the customers. It's not about 'buy these truffles at \$45 a portion' or whatever – it's not like that. It's about buying truffles when they're in season, and making sure they're from Australia. We'll pass that onto the customer. A bit of that extends from my efforts to just try and keep it real."

And keeping it real is what Shewry and Whiteoak do best. The honesty is palpable.

FRV

Attica

74 Glen Eira Road, Elsternwick
Melbourne, Australia
Phone: +61 3 9530 0111
www.attica.com.au