

The old pub smells great again, writes **Bob Hart**



► The Fawkner

52 TOORAK RD WEST, SOUTH YARRA
Ph: 9867 5853

Lunch Tue to Sun, dinner Tue to Sat, breakfast Sat and Sun. Licensed. Expect to pay \$55 a head plus wine for three courses.

BREATHING new life into a faded old dame with a golden past and a sagging bottom line is never easy. And in the case of South Yarra's once-legendary Fawkner Hotel, it has taken two extensive bouts of surgery.

The first, a couple of years ago, resulted in a place with early promise eroded by a daft name modification and a gradual loss of focus.

But new owners and fresh ideas have put the place back on the map — as a bistro serving precisely the sort of food expected of a polished pub these days.

A lick of paint here, a tweak there, cooking smells of distinction emanating from the kitchen, and all is well with the world. At last.

Well-regarded Melbourne chef Andrew Bates — whose family, he assures me, were not in the motel business — is one of a gang of four who have bought the freehold to the ground-floor pub complex.

But this week, it was the bistro bit that held our attention and was the source of the aforementioned cooking smells — notably a waft of truffle rising from steaming bowls of chicken and barley soup, which had my telly-chef mate and me scurrying hungrily towards our table.

We chose to begin our meals, however, not with the soup, but with a trio of fine entrees that we shared: a delectably correct pate en croute, an order of sauteed duck livers (recipe below) and a pissaladiere.

It's a dangerous business, of course, sharing entrees as good as this, especially with a telly-chef who appears to



try

This is yet another in the lengthening line of pubs with top tucker. Here are a few more:

- **Bouzy Rouge**, 470 Bridge Rd, Richmond. Ph: 9429 4348
- **The Court House**, 86 Errol St, North Melbourne. Ph: 9329 5394
- **The Montague**, 355 Park St, South Melbourne. Ph: 9690 9044
- **Healesville Hotel**, 256 Maroondah Highway, Healesville. Ph: 5962 4002

like his tucker almost as much as I do: knives and forks flashed, and food disappeared at a cracking rate.

The duck liver fell first — half a dozen fat lobes served on grilled brioche, and in a sauce made by deglazing the saute pan with sherry vinegar. Glorious.

Next, the pissaladiere — a wonderfully refined treatment of this civilised French mini-pizza, made here by placing the onion and tomato mix in an impossibly light tart of short-crust pastry and topping it with the obligatory black olives

and anchovies. One between two serious eaters was nowhere near enough.

The pate en croute calmed us down, however — an impeccably coarse construction of duck and pistachio locked inside a perfect, cold pie crust with just the right amount of meat jelly. Auspicious beginnings.

I then locked on to an offering on the specials board: peppered duck breast on a chestnut and pearl barley risotto. And it was outstanding.

Beautifully cooked and seasoned bar-

What we drank

FOOD as polished and as down-to-earth as the fine tucker served here deserves the company of a wine with similar qualities.

And here, it's hard to go past the excellent '04 Hennings shiraz house red from that most blessed of shiraz regions, Heathcote.

It is full, rich, balanced and very keenly priced at \$53 a bottle, \$8.50 a glass.

With crisp, wintry days now in play, it is well worth considering ending a robust pub lunch with a tumbler of something of substance from Rutherglen, our fortified wines Mecca.

So with our dumplings, we looked no further than the Chambers Rosewood NV Muscadelle (Tokay) on offer at a modest \$7 a glass. Yum.



Rich: 2004 Hennings shiraz

ley dotted with fresh chestnuts was topped with slivers of pink-centred, imaginatively spiced duck breast.

My mate's selection — chargrilled, marinated chicken thighs topped with a tarragon and tomato vinaigrette and served with a dome of rice pilaf — distracted him effectively from my duck, which was comforting.

A generous bowl of mixed-leaf salad was served with a fine, creamy dressing on the side, which led to some rather unseemly dipping of baby cos leaves, but we survived it. And thoroughly enjoyed it, actually.

A FEW of the usual suspects — a vanilla creme brulee, a warm chocolate brownie with a port wine poached pear and a slice of lemon tart — were offered up for pudding, but we let the chef choose for us.

He sent out an order of warm, fat, custard-filled dumplings with a globe of fine vanilla-bean ice cream, over which battle was resumed: they were excellent.

By which point, we agreed, the edge had been effectively taken off our legendary appetites, and the day glowed with new promise.

Chef Bates told me his approach at the Fawkner is to maintain the casual bistro approach we had experienced.

"I like to keep things nice and simple, a place I would bring my kids to," he says.

Which is all very well. But if the little tykes expect me to share my dumplings with them, they can think again.



▲ **Polished pub:** new owners and fresh ideas have put the Fawkner back on the map.

◀ **Outstanding:** peppered duck breast on a chestnut and pearl barley risotto.

◀ **Kids, beware:** (far left) custard-filled dumplings with vanilla-bean ice cream.

▼ **Refined:** the pissaladiere — a civilised French mini-pizza topped with black olives.

Pictures: DEAN CAMBRAY

Yes, I have many livers to toss

recipe

IT'S a simple enough formula, but seriously delicious: fresh duck livers, sherry vinegar and grilled brioche.

But the magic, as always, lies in the way the dish is put together, and here is how chef Andrew Bates goes about it:

- Clean about 600g fresh duck livers and season well with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Heat splash of

good, EV olive oil in heavy frypan and saute livers briskly, until lightly coloured on all sides.

Add clove of crushed or finely chopped garlic and toss for another minute.

- Deglaze pan, while the livers are still cooking, with 4tbs good (Spanish) sherry vinegar and add cup of concentrated veal stock (reduced from 1 litre).

- Remove livers from pan and

keep warm. Add 50g unsalted butter to sauce and reduce, stirring, to coating consistency.

- Lightly grill four thick slices fresh brioche, ideally on hot ribbed grill to leave scorch marks, and place on four warmed plates.

- Divide livers between plates, positioning on brioche slices. Add chopped herbs (parsley, tarragon, chervil) to sauce and spoon over livers.

