

Astral

Simon Thomsen
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A \$1000 dinner falls short of bang for the buck.

Address

Level 17, Hotel Tower, 80 Pyrmont St, Pyrmont

Phone

(02) 9777 9000

Style

Restaurants

Cuisine

Vegetarian, Modern Australian

Hours

Tue-Thu 6pm-10pm, Fri-Sat 6pm-10.30pm

Details

Licensed

Payment

Bankcard, Visa, AMEX, Cash, Mastercard, Diners Club

Price Guide

3 course set price menu \$95pp(Tues-Thurs); tasting menu from \$125pp

Astral, Pyrmont

13.5/20

The \$1000 Tasting Menu

The Summary \$1000 is a lot to pay for dinner and Astral doesn't reach the stars at that price. It was a good meal, with decent wines, just not at that cost.

Value Average.

Chef Sean Connolly.

Owners Star City.

Service Pleasant.

Vegetarians Whole truffle anyone?

Noise Low.

Wheelchair access Yes.

Prices \$1000; all cards.

[What does the score mean?](#)

Yep, you read right. A grand for dinner in 10 courses over five hours at Astral, Star City's fine diner. Actually, it costs \$2000, since dining solo for a meal like this is as much fun as sex on your own. You have to share the experience, which involves the expected trappings of luxury: caviar, truffles, foie gras, lobster and Krug champagne.

I want to be wowed, to swoon and be seduced by an experience that's almost impossible to replicate. A meal worthy of the movie *La Grande Bouffe* (and perhaps *Babette's Feast*) filled with food and wines that will haunt me until my final breath.

Astral's chef, Sean Connolly, sets himself an almost impossible task. His biggest hurdle is that we eat so well in Australia for so little money. The previous night I dined at Tetsuya's and was reminded of why it is one of the world's truly great restaurants.



Caviar and quail egg with gold leaf by Sean Connolly at Astral.

(Pic: Marco Del Grande)

It makes me giddy to recall all 15 superb courses (\$185). The final bill was \$558. So my expectations are a bit like drinking a \$50 shiraz and wondering if I'd have 10 times the fun if it was a \$500 Grange (you don't).

Connolly is talented. While Melbourne's Crown and casinos all around the world have pulled out all stops with global brand-name chefs, he has quietly built a solid reputation in this plush, spacious room, 17 floors above the gambling din. My cynical side wonders if the \$1000 menu is designed to retrieve your winnings but the Yorkshire-born chef is by nature a generous host, as his normal menus (\$105-\$240) prove.

Unfortunately, his style is probably too robust for this task. He's blessed with sound technique, an imagination and the intelligence not to try too hard with prime ingredients - a flaw in many lesser chefs - but, in the end, I'd love this meal at half the price.

The other difficulty is assistant sommelier Gabrielle Webster's wine choices. There's the obvious; Krug with caviar, plus the unexpected and fabulous Bordeaux-style Herzog sauvignon blanc with lobster but the wines are otherwise pedestrian for the circumstance. She hampers herself with half bottles from Astral's impressive, 30-page global list. Somewhere along the way, I want to see stars, if not touch them.

The flourish of a French grand cru, a benchmark Australian, a standout year and that rare pleasure in an instantly gratified world, bottle age, should play their parts. Instead we're poured a lacklustre Burgundy that downplays the loveliest dish: quail, fragrant from Manjimup truffle, with peeled asparagus and a truffle-flecked "anglais" of potato soaked with butter.

In total, the wines cost about \$550, or \$700 if you count a glass of Remy Martin Louis XIII cognac with the excessive, multi-textured Valrhona chocolate plate. That leaves \$1300 for food, so let me tell you about it. You can try four of the 10 dishes here without blowing a grand. The pleasant cauliflower veloute with scallop and almond oil is the amuse bouche for everyone. Our 50g of Petrossian caviar would cost \$425, although the gilt-cloaked quail egg would thrill Faberge. The caviar, farmed in California, is respectable.

King crab raviolo, covered in a foamed treacle beurre blanc, is a balance of sharp and briny. It's an a la carte entree, while the lobster, poached with a confit of portobello mushrooms and creamy pine nuts, is a main. Abalone is the ocean's answer to choko. I don't know how it got the reputation it enjoys. Connolly braises his in master stock, slices it finely and then sautes it in butter for a salad with slivers of artichoke and pickled carrot with the pizzazz of micro-herbs.

The wagyu is wonderfully over-the-top with buttery excess. A large, rich and rare tenderloin is slathered in foie gras butter, with a fairy ring of tiny morels and marrow-and-breadcrumbs-filled roasted bone.

It's followed by the wicked Brillat-Savarin, a triple-cream cow's milk cheese. Here's the moment, I think, when gluttony will top my list of sins. But rather than leave the cheese on the table, a dollop is scooped onto a slice of fruit bread and away it goes. Penfolds winemaker John Duval's Plexus shiraz-grenache-mourvedre, which I really admire, is its predictable company.

After such artery-clogging decadence, poached pear, lifted by bergamot in earl grey ice-cream and the refreshing note of a green tea foam, is welcome, before plunging full-throttle into chocolate at a point that demands something small and exquisite. I suppose, as Oscar Wilde said, nothing exceeds like excess. The service is efficient, without bathing us in affection. I don't want sycophancy but it would be nice to feel valued. At times we feel ignored.

In the spiritual home of conspicuous consumption, Monaco, dinner at Alain Ducasse's opulent Le Louis XV sets you back about \$400 each (plus wine). Measured against that benchmark, Astral's \$1000 menu isn't the indulgence you deserve. It's a gimmick, unworthy of Connolly's ability and the every day excellence this restaurant offers.

I miss the last tram home, thus forfeiting my \$1.50 return fare. That's the sort of risk you take when you splash out.

THE MENU

Cauliflower veloute with scallop and almond oil
Petrossian caviar with gold quail egg
Abalone salad with truffled artichoke barigoule
King crab raviolo with treacle buerre blanc
Lobster with Portobello mushrooms, chervil and pine nuts
Truffled quail with asparagus and potato anglais
Wagyu with foie gras, morels and bone marrow
Brillat-Savarin cheese with fruit toast
Poached pear with earl grey ice-cream and sencha foam
Valrhona chocolate plate
Tea, coffee and petits fours

THE WINES

Lillet Blanc, Bordeaux, France
NV Krug grand cuvee, Reims, France
'05 Chablis Billaud-Simon, Burgundy, France
'02 Josmeyer Gewurztraminer, Alsace, France
'06 Herzog barrel-fermented sur lie sauvignon blanc, Marlborough, New Zealand
'04 Tollot-Beaut Chorey-les-Beaune, Burgundy, France
'02 Lakes Folly cabernets, Hunter Valley, NSW
'05 John Duval Plexus (SGM), Barossa Valley, SA
Remy Martin Louis XIII Grande Champagne Cognac, France
'02 Monbazillac Cuvee Des Anges, Grand Maison, Bergerac, France

Sydney dining is cheap, in world terms, as many an overseas traveller's credit card bill will testify, but a \$1000 set-price dinner is up there with the best. Few others are so expensive but most exclude alcohol. They include Pierre Gagnaire, Paris (\$400); Gordon Ramsay, London (\$258); The French Laundry, California, (\$277).

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