

PROFILE

Can you bring us up to speed with your career?

I'm a 32-year-old New Zealander. I worked in good London kitchens (Kensington Place, Quaglino's and Marco Pierre White's Criterion) before moving to Banc in Sydney in 1997 under executive chef Liam Tomlin. When Banc closed in 2003, I was second in command. I then moved to Cruise on Sydney's Circular Quay as executive chef. When the opportunity came to open my own place, I jumped at it.

Your venue is Restaurant Assiette.

What's the deal?

We opened in mid 2005 in Surrey Hills, a trendy foodie area just outside the Sydney CBD, so overheads are cheaper. We only serve 50 people and don't turn tables. We do a daily 10-course tasting menu – it's our biggest drawcard and half our trade. Once a month we offer a 15-course Sunday dinner. It's very popular with regulars and the hospitality industry.

Why does it work?

Most Australian restaurants offer set prices for entrées, mains and desserts, and better restaurants also serve tasting menus. Our small menu changes monthly, with five entrées, five mains and four desserts. We also throw in an amuse-bouche and a pre-dessert. It's great value.

Does that mean diners are snubbing fine-dining restaurants?

There's still place for fine dining in Sydney – for occasions and for tourists – but it needs to be pitched right. Tetsuya's, Rockpool, The Establishment, Becasse – they're all working well.

Your food has been described as modern Australian. Do you agree? I guess so, because it's classic but I play around with Japanese, Indian and Chinese flavours. Our menu reads French, then Asian. There may be a rabbit and foie gras terrine with a white asparagus and hazelnut emulsion. Or a roasted barramundi fish with Chinese-style oxtail and

crispy lotus root – you can't call that French.

What's challenging about running your own restaurant?

It's hard to find good floor staff in Sydney, like anywhere else. So it's important to look after them. At Assiette, service is good, but less stiff than at fine-dining establishments. We have four floor staff: two waiters, a manager who doubles as a sommelier, and a floor runner.

What are your thoughts on Cape Town restaurants?

Eating out is quite cheap. Some Sydney cafés charge more for breakfast than South African restaurants charge for a main course. But then Sydney's too focused on a view, so they charge a lot to cover the rent. Visually I wasn't prepared for Cape Town – the view from Table Mountain is absolutely stunning! People are friendly too. Môreson Bread & Wine served my favourite meal. The menu was exciting to read – garlic bread and butter pudding, tuna gravadlax – as well as interesting and tasty. Often the simplest places offer the best meals. La Colombe was also good, but maybe I expected too much. The Showroom is a nice space.

Are any new food trends gripping Australia?

There isn't one particular trend, aside from a focus on value. Food is lighter, with less cream and more vinaigrette-style sauces. We're doing a pan-fried baby snapper fish fillet with tomato ravioli and olive squid vinaigrette. Melbourne's still doing a lot of foams and jellies in the El Bulli direction, but that's not big in Sydney. French influence has been strong in the last five years. Now it's Italian – Melbourne is dictating this trend for simplicity. I'm only doing pastas and carpaccio on my menu. Cheese is still big. There are a lot of good ones but everything has to be pasteurised. I wish they'd lift the laws. They've just allowed imported Roquefort to be brought in. We have the same problem with foie gras lobes because they're unpasteurised; we only get pâté blocks.

Do you think you'll stay in Australia? I love Australia, although I was born in Auckland. Eventually I want to employ a head chef and have more time for a family. Sydney is an amazing city so I think I'll be there a while.

Restaurant Assiette, 42 Albion Street, Surry Hills, Sydney. 0961 2 9212-7979.

He's the owner of a trendy new Sydney restaurant and one of Australia's most talented chefs. We chatted to Warren Turnbull about tasting menus and Table Mountain on his recent visit to South Africa



We're watching... Warren Turnbull