



17 DEC, 2019

## BEST DISHES OF 2019

Herald Sun, Melbourne

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THE YEAR THAT WAS

EDITED BY  
DAN STOCKFOLLOW ME.  
@dantonstockEMAIL.  
dan.stock  
@news.com.au

# BEST DISHES OF 2019

From brilliant bread to plant perfection, Victorian chefs continue to impress and delight with their creative and delicious dishes, writes **Dan Stock**

**C**ould 2019 be the year carbs came in from the cold and regained their rightful place on our dinner tables?

Looking back at some of the most memorable bits and bites I've popped in my gob over the past year, it certainly seems so.

Whether the heady-rich pleasure of a Vegemite, camembert and **truffle toasty** paired with a NZ pinot at Carlton's **Lord Lygon**, the salty-fluffy-charry **flatbread with labne** to open the account at supercool **Old Palm Liquor** or the dukkah-sprinkled flatbread that's on dunking duties for a bonkers/brilliant **hummus and XO** double act at Shane Delia's **Maha East**, cool carbs were hot stuff.

Various versions of charry blistered bits of dough shone bright, from the seriously good **flatbreads** at the **Prince Dining Room** (the fiocco salumi teamed with fresh mozzarella and basil leaves is a knockout) to the trio of cheeses topping a classic **pepperoni** pie at **Pepe's Italian** and the decidedly unauthentic but undeniably delicious **naan**

**pizzas** out of the tandoor at Jessi Singh's **Daughter in Law**.

And then, two words: ranch sauce. As if we weren't already hooked on the massive American-style pies at new-wave old school Carlton pizza joint **Leonardo's** — the Sichuan-tingly **Chinese Bolognese** is a must — but add a jug of ranch sauce on the side for dipping your crusts in? That's all sorts of wipe-your-chin-dry joy right there.

It was also a year in which chefs dug plants.

Mark Ebbels is making the most of the ¼-acre kitchen garden at his disposal at **Tarrawarra**, putting it to use in innovative dishes such as **pumpkin with apple and macadamia feta** topped with quince and salmon roe. At **Lesa**, Dave Verheul's **terrine of**

**beetroot** teamed with salted elderberries and olives is refined, creative and unbelievably good — as is so much else on his tight, bang-for-buck four-course menu. But in the depths of winter there was no better bowl to brighten a long night and

warm a cold heart than Melbourne's best **onion soup** at Brighton's diminutive French diner, **Curly Whiskers**.

Many, many memorable things also came from the sea.

Nicky Riemer continues to give South Melbourne's locals reason to never leave the hood with her brilliant bistro fare at **Bellota** — her sensational **eel spaghetti** topped with chilli-spiked pangrattato is reason alone to visit — while at the pointier end of the spectrum, **Vue de monde's** new chef Hugh Allen has put his stamp on the fine diner in the most impressive way. From a selection of oysters shucked, served and slurped by the kitchen bench to **Tasmanian uni with caviar** and bunya bunya, and marron in a heady native curry, his is a clear-eyed vision of contemporary Australia that's thrilling.

Also exciting: the clever take on old-school prawn toast at **Oakridge** that sees crustacean swapped for croc, a punchy XO adding unmistakable heat. Crocodile rock, indeed.

Scott Pickett's XO game is



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also strong at his reborn **Estelle**, slathering expertly treated **flounder** in a spectacular sauce where dried anchovy and shrimp add funk to chopped mussels and fermented black beans and a first date-unfriendly amount of fried garlic and shallots.

But the **skate with hazelnuts, grapes and jamon** at **Dessous**, Flinders Lane's new late-night subterranean wine-dine-good times hot spot, is equally excellent. Team with the poshest wedges in town — with 'nduja sour cream and crunchy fried chicken skin — for fish and chips like you've never seen before but will want to again.

Another Aussie classic — the **meat pie** — has been brought into today with chef Ray Capaldi transforming his fine-dining experience and old-school reverence for technique and produce into genre-defining creations that include a gloriously cheesy cauliflower number and chunky beef that can't be beat at **Wonderpop & Deli**. In Thomastown, the best way to start the day is to say yes please to cheese. Just-made **ricotta calda** served so fresh it's still warm is like eating a creamy cloud at the **That's Amore** factory cafe — though the breakfast bagel with crumbed-fried caciotta cheese and a fried egg is an oozy doozy that'll see you through to night.

Speaking of which, at late-night fun diner **Elektra** chef Rueben Davis has put an after-dark twist on the classic **beans-on-toast** British breakfast of his youth, where broad beans and harissa-spiked mussels come snuggled under gossamer sheets of lardo. Swoon. See also: the **crab** with sauteed milky egg whites at Albert Park's super luxe **Sun Kitchen**, the heart-stopping decadence of pan-fried **terrine** at **Citta** and Helly Raichura's terrific vegetarian take on a **kebab** at her secret mod Indian dining room, **Enter Via Laundry**.

Whether wrapped in spicy **blood pudding** and served with a sweet apple chutney at Footscray's **Vic Hotel**, the gooey-yolked, **smoked eel** wonders at Anglesea's **Captain Moonlite**, the decadent **wagyu** version at Japanese BBQ restaurant **Niku Ou** or Rhys Bennett's clever **kedgeree** take at North Melbourne's **Westwood** — the world's best bar snack, **Scotch eggs**, where everywhere. More please.

More? To that list I'll add **manti** — Coskun Uysal's delicate, dexterous dumplings — at the reigning *delicious.100* No.1, **Tulum**, the plump Siberian **pelemi** filled with pork and beef and served with sour cream at Kyneton's **Royal George**, and the **suantang shuijiao** (hot and sour soup dumplings) at **Shaanxi-style restaurant** in Box Hill.

While veganism dominated the headlines, my more mindful meat consumption was rewarded this year with a perfect dry-aged Strathbogie black angus **scotch fillet** at Mornington's **Counting House**, the satisfyingly homely — and local — **slow roasted lamb** at the Otways-celebrating **Yield** in Birregurra, and the **Hardware Club's chicken neck sausage**,

the best, and most delicious, use of the whole bird I've yet seen.

And though it remains the most perfect chicken liver parfait on the planet, the meat fruit at **Dinner By Heston** this year had a **mushroom and truffle** makeover, and the vegetarian version was, thrillingly, as good as the real thing.

One of late spring's best surprises was seeing peas turn

up in dessert. At Fitzroy's tiny **Gaea**, chef Mo Zhou serves up sublime sweet-savouriness of **peas and pine needles with fresh curd**, while at risen-from-the-ashes **Ten Minutes By Tractor**, a similar riff sees buttermilk panna cotta

brightened by a terrific **pea sorbet** and joined by a medley of fresh peas, roasted pine nuts and juicy cucumber finished with a pine needle snow. But really, 2019 was all about bread.

There's the **Baker Bleu queue** and the fluffy white **katsu sangas** at **Saint Dreux**, but for mine, the best \$4 I spent this year was on the cracking-crustured sourdough served oven-warm with a cheesy, peppery **cacio e pepe** at **Etta**.

It really is the best thing since sliced bread.



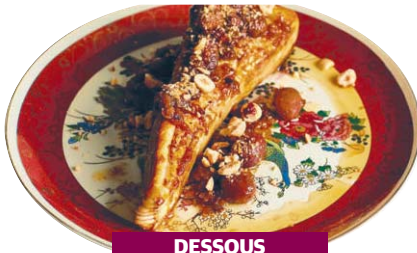
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### Dan Stock's **TOP 5 RESTAURANTS FOR 2019**

**Tulum** 16.5/20 **Citta** 16/20 **Lume** 16/20  
**O.My** 16/20 **Enter via Laundry** 15/20



**DESSOUS**  
Skate with grapes



**PRINCE DINING ROOM**  
Fiocco flatbread



**ETTA**  
Bread with cacio e pepe butter



**TARRAWARRA**  
Pumpkin with apple



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**CURLY WHISKERS**  
French onion soup



**TULUM**  
Manti



**SUN KITCHEN**  
Crab with milky egg whites



**NIKU OU**  
Scotch eggs



**SHAANXI-STYLE RESTAURANT**  
Hot-sour dumpling soup