

# Coast host with most



## Steve Manfredi's tasty new venture combines Mediterranean flair with home-grown vegies.

THE coffee is by Steve Manfredi. The outdoor umbrellas are (rather unnecessarily) emblazoned with his brand. Coffee cups are one of the chef's ventures too, along with the sexy white olive oil bowls, that look like tiered rockpools, and the triangular plates.

Ask the waiter for wine and she'll defer to Manfredi. The '04 Masi Campofiorin Ripasso (\$50), made from four Italian red grape styles, is both bold and elegant. And there's the chef, blue cap on, in the bar choosing wines, strolling from kitchen to tables with plates of food, playing raconteur or dabbling elsewhere.

In a fenced garden just 50 metres from the kitchen, Manfredi grows tomatoes from Tuscan seeds for a spectacularly good entree in his birthplace's national colours. A whole roasted tomato squats like a fat, happy Buddha on a thick slice of buffalo mozzarella, its heat melting the light, sharp cheese ever so slightly to liberate its stringy personality. This warm take on insalata caprese is crowned with a generous dollop of pesto and scattered with bitter leaves. At \$21, yes, it's expensive; however, it's also fantastic. What a fine rebuttal to the perennial complaint of what happened to flavoursome tomatoes.

Welcome to la festa di Manfredi. In less-relaxed hands, the injecting of so much of the chef's personality would be an enormous conceit, but Steve Manfredi has spent more than 25 years cooking, thinking about, designing for and writing on matters cucina (food), drawing on his north Italian heritage while giving it an Australian context. Now he has a patron prepared to let his accumulated wisdom run its course, and Bells at Killcare is showing early signs of redefining a regional restaurant.

John Singleton is an unlikely antipodean Medici, but since the millionaire adman bought Bells, a small resort on a south Central Coast peninsula, he's given Manfredi free rein to create a dining destination. Some aspects are familiar to diners at Coast and Manta, two Sydney restaurants given Manfredi makeovers a few years back. However, those places lacked fruit trees, including figs, to make gelati and sorbet (\$14.50), not to mention vegie and herb gardens and chooks for eggs.

The Bells menu begins with two cracking antipasti plates (\$24), either cured meats by Pino Tomini Foresti (another Manfredi collaborator) or a marvellous sprinkle of seafood and vegetables. The latter includes a toothpick of tiny Patagonian scallops that win for sustainability what they sacrifice in flavour, plus large slices of braised octopus tentacles, sticky with the natural jellies, a blue swimmer crab and ricotta fritter, plus pickled vegies, roasted beetroot and wickedly hot bell chillies filled with eggplant, all from the garden. The remaining dishes linger in northern Italy's heartiness, yet tread lightly.

The four primi (entrees) are also offered in secondi (main) sizes. In a nod to Sicily, small Hawkesbury calamari tubes are stuffed with chopped prawns and roasted (\$23/\$34). The tentacles are grilled and it's reassembled on a cloud-soft bed of polenta, splashed with prawn stock infused with tomato, lemon and parsley for colour and contrast.

Stracci pasta is hand-made daily to accompany braised rabbit (\$25/\$36). It's a glorious mix of wide ribbons of thin, saw-edged pasta flopping around the sweet meat, slowly braised in white wine with aromatic root vegetables.

Bells is a pretty room with its smart,

## Bells at Killcare 15/20

**The Summary** Sydney chef Steve Manfredi returns to the kitchen with plans to grow his own produce for a regional ristorante that encapsulates his beliefs about the pleasures of the table.

**Value** Reasonable

**Chefs** Steve Manfredi and Cameron Cansdell.

**Owner** John Singleton.

**Service** Delightful and warm-hearted.

**Food** Italian.

**Wine** Credible, affordable list of Australian and Italian, plus impressive Hunter back vintages; 15 by the glass.

**Vegetarians** Entree, pasta and salads.

**Child friendly** Not really, so let them run around on the lawns.

**Noise** Moderate.

**Wheelchair access** Yes.

**Prices** Entrees \$19-\$25; mains \$33-\$39; desserts \$14.50; most cards.

**Where** 107 The Scenic Road, Killcare, 4360 2411.

**When** Lunch Fri-Sun noon-3.30pm; dinner daily from 6.30pm.

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beach-house vibe in Yves Klein blue and white, and wide veranda. It's full of pleasant touches, including the complimentary Sicilian and Ligurian olives served on deep-blue glazed pottery plates made by Hill End artist Lino Alvarez, plus hand-blown water glasses. Manfredi commissioned both. The other eye-catchers are delicate ceramic seashells glowing with tea-lights on every damask-clothed table at night. Rob Bamford, who designed the plates and coffee cups, lives locally.



**A nod to Sicily ... (above) calamari stuffed with prawns.** Photos: Marco Del Grande

The six secondi have an earthy bent, including roast pork loin with wicked pork-belly crackling and a bitter cavolo nero gratinata (\$39), although it lacks the punch promised by house-made mustard fruits. The nose-clearing pungency of the real thing is missing, leaving the sweetness to dominate.

And unless it's hand-picked by virgins at dawn before they wake me with a nice cup of tea from the restaurant's six excellent options, \$12 is quite simply a gob-smackingly outrageous amount to pay for a tiny side dish of the savoy cabbage and tomato. Perhaps virgins are out of season.

Still, tartufo of Amedei chocolate (\$14.50) is rich enough to rival Silvio Berlusconi. This Tuscan chocolate matches Valrhona for class, and Manfredi's dessert is wondrously excessive without losing the plot.

A small ball of raspberries and grappa-soaked sponge is encased in milk chocolate mousse, then rolled in dark chocolate and dusted with cocoa. It's about golf-ball size, wading in caramelised clotted cream. Be still my clogging arteries.

**[sthomsen@smh.com.au](mailto:sthomsen@smh.com.au)**