



Clockwise from above: Hardys Bay jetty; Killcare Beach; Bells at Killcare deluxe spa villa balcony; La Paloma Pottery with olives and parmesan biscuits



BELLS AT KILLCARE

107 The Scenic Road, Killcare. (02) 4360 2411. www.killcarebells.com.au Distance from CBD: 95km/90 minutes

It's Friday night on the Central Coast and MC Tony Squires is navigating a roomful of foodies through Stefano Manfredi's "five regions" dinner – signature dishes from Le Marche, Veneto, Abruzzo, Sardegna and Toscana, with cleverly complementary wines. It's an impressive degustation menu that does with grilled scallops, roast pork and loin of rabbit what Brett Whiteley did with paint.

As a boutique retreat alone – a destination for out-of-towners in search of a weekend's beach, bush or hibernation – Bells has plenty to recommend it. Its 11 cottages sit artfully among acres of landscaped gardens with ponds, bridges, sunny nooks and a croquet lawn. It's a heart-pumping walk from Killcare and Putty beaches, Hardys Bay and good bushwalking tracks. But add to the mix an eatery with Manfredi at the helm and it moves up another notch. The restaurant is fast establishing itself as a local community drawcard with its tasting nights, Sunday jazz and *prix fixe* Tuesdays. Indeed, it was awarded a chef's hat in the 2009 *Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide*.

Lunch on the sunny verandah is as therapeutic as the in-room massages on offer in the cottages. Highlights of the arty-hearty menu include a seafood and barley stew with prawns, calamari, vongole and salt cod; pan-fried scallops with celeriac, anchovy and roast garlic salsa; pasta stracci with osso bucco; and a roast rabbit leg stuffed with veal sweetbreads served with a white garlic mustard sauce. A chef's garden plot ensures there are always fresh leaves for salads and sides.

Don't demur over dessert. The triumph is the ball that is Tartufo di Amedei – at its centre a handmade orange compote, surrounded by hazelnut sponge cake, Amedei chocolate grenache, Belgian chocolate, and a dusting of cocoa, served on creamy baked-then-caramelised ricotta.

Having such an accomplished kitchen means breakfast provisions for the cottages are first-rate: handmade sausages, jams, chutney, granola and bread, plus slices of Bangalow bacon, and fruit that tastes like fruit.

The establishment, run by Karina and Brian Barry, was bought two years ago by adman John Singleton who spent annual holidays in the area as a boy. He has recently annexed two blocks and Bells has plans to add half a dozen more cottages.

Open: lunch Fri-Sun, dinner daily. Mains from \$35.

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