

# eat out terry durack



Photos: Lidia Nikonova, Edwina Pickles

## A letter full of love for Greece

**B**eware of Greeks bearing gifts, as they say (and have said since about 20BC). Unless, of course, it's a Greek-Australian chef with an exceptional gift for taking the best of both modern and ancient Greek cookery.

Over the past 20 years, Peter Conistis has drifted in and out of the Sydney restaurant scene with a string of chef's hatted restaurants from Cosmos and Eleni's in Darlinghurst to Omega and Civic Dining in the city. In the process, he has taken Greek food beyond the usual bread and dips. Moussaka of eggplant, sea scallops and taramasalata, take a bow. Rabbit and black olive pie, come on down.

Having said that, I find myself totally entranced by the bread and dips at the new Alpha restaurant, fronting Castlereagh Street yet part of the historic Hellenic Club on Elizabeth Street.

Board after board of the house-made pita comes out of the mezzanine kitchen, trailing good smoky, wheaty smells throughout the room. One table alone apparently ordered 18 serves last week, and you can't blame them. It's old-fashioned pita; golden, not white, and a little puffy from the yeast, with that slightly

sweet tang lurking beneath the scorch-flecks from the grill. The taramasalata (\$10) is creamy, pale and thick; the lightly fishy taste of cured mullet roe balanced with lemon. And best of all, it shows that this once high-flying chef is content to do bread and dips, without having to turn them into an ironic reference.

Like the food, the room has been given a good dash of "Grecian modernism", with fishing net-inspired hanging lights and a dramatically battered Greek-inscribed wall that looks the result of an archaeological dig. Designer Paul Papadopoulos has worked the large, high-ceilinged space into a sweeping, banquette-seated, well-lit dining room, an artisan food store to one side and a casual cafe to the front, with a high-stooled counter and bar at the back that accommodates early evening mezze nibbles and lunchtime displays of Greek comfort food.

Much of the food is for sharing, from the large, golden, flaky, spanakopita spinach and filo pie (\$16) to the spiced, slow-roasted lamb shoulder (\$29) that's on seemingly every table. The "vintage" section lists the eggplant moussaka, and rabbit and olive pie, but there are plenty of new ideas here too, such as ouzo-

cured ocean trout, sesame leaf dolmades with almond rice and preserved lemon avgolemono, and Greek doughnuts with spiced honey syrup and candied walnut ice-cream.

I not only love the menu here, I'm totally relieved. It's not too basic, and not too fancy, but juuuust right. I love the Kalamata olive oil, the barrel-aged fetta, the slow-roasted thyme-honey- and ouzo-glazed lamb spare ribs served with a buttery, lemony carrot puree (\$18). Love the quail (\$26), cured in mastic salt, marinated in sumac molasses, olive oil and thyme, then thrown on the grill, finished with pomegranate and Greek balsamic treacle, and sent out with fetta and watermelon. It tastes like a holiday on a Greek island feels.

I love that he's doing whole grilled fish, especially when it's baby snapper (\$32) with crisp skin, fragrant with bay leaves and finished with an oregano dressing. Love that parsnips get confit'd into filo spring rolls with caramelised onion (\$8); that the filo is house-made; that wild greens (\$9) are a lovely tumble of dandelions and wild chicory, garlic and chilli; and that the Greek accent extends all the way through a dessert of rosy, slow cooked quince, creamy lemon ice-cream and light-as-air, house-baked kourabiedes shortbreads; all tingle and tang.

# 15/20

## Alpha

Address 238 Castlereagh Street, city  
Phone 9098 1111

Open Lunch, Mon-Fri; dinner, Mon-Sat  
Licensed Yes

Cost About \$90 for two, plus drinks



### The low-down

**Best bit** The high-drama fit-out.

**Worst bit** Music feels out of place.

**Go to dish** Mastic-spiced quail with fetta and watermelon salad, \$26.

I love the Alpha Estate wines (no relation) from the Amyndeon plateau in northern Greece, from a wine list that divides its favours equally between Greece and Australia. Alpha's 2012 sauvignon blanc (\$64) has a fragrant, mellow character and long finish, and the 2009 pinot (\$89) is ridiculously good.

The floor, under general manager Vanessa Chant and restaurant manager Jye Hong is well-paced and the kitchen, while certainly under pressure, is keeping up. Alpha is one of the biggest and brightest restaurants to open in Sydney in 2013. This is how we want to eat Greek food, and this is where we'll want to eat it.

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### How we score

Of 20 points, 10 are awarded for food, five for service, three for ambience, two for wow factor.  
12 Reasonable 13 Solid and satisfactory 14 Good 15 Very good 16 Seriously good 17 Great 18 Excellent 19 Outstanding 20 The best of the best  
Restaurants are reviewed again for The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide and scores may vary.

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