

entertaining

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take its slow

WHEN LIKE-MINDED PEOPLE GATHER RESOLVED TO HAVE A MEANINGFUL
GOOD TIME, THE RESULT IS ALWAYS NOTHING SHORT OF AMAZING.



A group of passionate Australian foodies came together on the banks of the Murray River (which forms the border between the states of New South Wales and Victoria) in the large country town of Mildura. Leading professional chefs and food writers such as Maggie Beer and Stephanie Alexander and passionate amateurs alike were united by a common interest in the world's dwindling biodiversity, and a common belief that the Slow Food Movement is a powerful tool for reversing this decline.

Mildura is a long way from anywhere, but has been on Australia's gastronomic map for a number of years due to the presence of Stefano de Pieri, an Italian from the Veneto region who married a local girl and established an award-winning

restaurant, Stefano's, in her family's hotel. As well as being an excellent chef, Stefano is a passionate supporter of the local region and of the work of the Slow Food Movement, and his new business venture, a restored paddlesteamer called The Avoca was the venue for much of the weekend's proceedings.

The weekend commenced on Friday night as Slow Food members arrived from all over Australia and were greeted with local wines and a tempting array of antipasto on The Avoca. The gentle rocking of the boat, permanently moored on the tree-lined banks of the Murray, the sound of the birds and other river life as dusk settled were the perfect elixir to revive minds fatigued from the week's work and bodies weary from the long journey, and to create the right frame of mind for a truly slow weekend.



Saturday was a business day with administrative issues relating to Slow Food Australia being decided. As compensation for this hard day's work, we had been promised a wonderful dinner at an undisclosed location. Soon all was revealed as coaches deposited diners at a vineyard on the outskirts of Mildura owned by the Gareffa family, originally from Italy's southern region of Calabria. By the late 1800s, water from the Murray was being used to irrigate surrounding land; the resultant fertility drew settlers from all over the country and abroad. Thus Mildura, and the other towns along the Murray, have long had a thriving migrant community.

Italians, who were among the first drawn to the area, planted grape vines and olive trees as well as the many market gardens along the Murray's banks, and their descendants have kept the cuisine and traditions of their forefathers alive for all to enjoy. The stage was set for a magnificent Dinner under the Vines... a long table for 130 guests was set up between two rows of high-trellised vines, whole suckling pigs were roasting in outdoor ovens, an equipment shed had been converted into a makeshift kitchen, and one of the vineyard owners prepared a traditional Calabrian treat of anchovies twisted into bread dough and deep-fried on a large outdoor stove. Just before guests were seated, a group of men, women and girls in traditional costumes appeared from among the rows of vines, the men played brightly-decorated traditional instruments and the young girls and women danced and handed flowers and grapes to delighted onlookers.

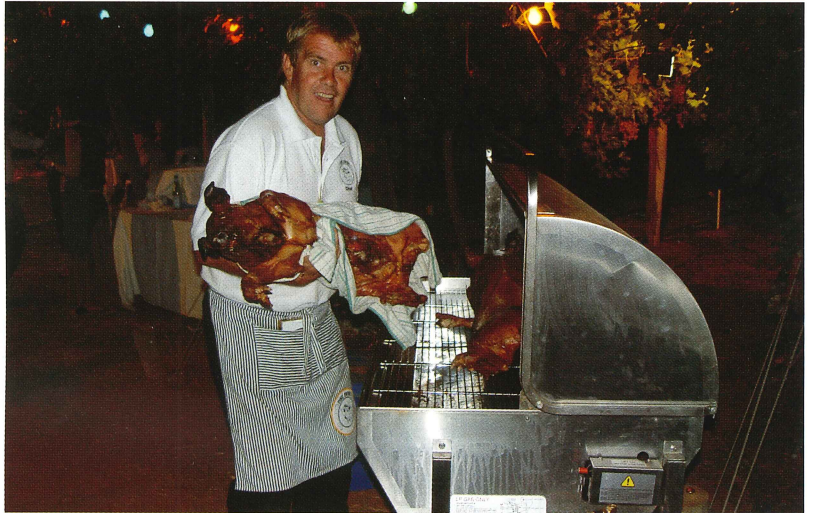
The Avoca (opposite the Mildura Lawn Tennis Court, Phone (61) 3-5022-1444) is now officially open as a casual restaurant and café (downstairs) serving simple meals, great coffee and cakes; and on the covered deck upstairs, a bar where guests can sit back, enjoy the evening breeze, sip a glass of wine and listen to the life of the river, the splash of landing pelicans and the whistles from other paddlesteamers going by. The boat's restoration has been kept simple, white wooden walls contrast with polished dark wood floors, wooden tables and comfortable chairs. Large windows downstairs let in plenty of light and air, and fold down plastic sheeting upstairs protects against inclement weather when necessary.



The International Slow Food Movement began in Italy in the late 1980s as a protest against the globalisation of the world's food supplies and the ensuing loss of biodiversity and of traditional artisanal products and skills. It now boasts over 76,000 members, in 47 countries. It is committed to saving the countless traditional foods that are disappearing for want of a market or because of new globalised regulations: grains, fruit, vegetables and animal breeds, but also processed products such as cheeses, salamis, sauces, wines and more. Through projects such as the Slow Food Award for Biodiversity (presented annually to people who contribute to the protection of breeds, species, products or ecosystems in danger of extinction), the Ark of Taste (a metaphorical ark which catalogues traditional foods from around the world at risk of disappearing) and the International Presidia which provide funding for specialists to assist the best artisanal producers of at-risk foods to stabilise production techniques, establish stringent production standards and promote their product in potential markets, Slow Food aims to preserve and improve biodiversity and offer viable, agricultural prospects to the world's poorest regions. Foods to have benefited from this project already include rice from the Malaysian highlands, rare black beans from the Basque territories and edible seeds from the Brazilian Amazon.

For more information on Slow Food visit www.slowfood.com

All were seated at the candlelit table already set with bread, olives and wine and soon food arrived on large communal platters—locally cured pork (like a spicy prosciutto) wrapped around ripe black figs, local yabbies freshly boiled, large pan-fried sardines, cauliflower croquettes, garden snails (plucked from the vines) cooked in a spicy chilli sauce, fresh artichoke hearts simply pan-fried and served with lemon wedges, the suckling pig, and big bowls of green salad. Dessert was a special treat, a verjuice pannacotta prepared by well-known Barossa Valley chef and Slow Food member, Maggie Beer. All was washed down with excellent local wines. **WD**





CAULIFLOWER CROQUETTES

Makes approximately 12 to 14 patties

1/2 large cauliflower
2 cups self-raising flour
1 cup grated parmesan cheese
1 clove garlic, crushed (see notes)
2 tbsp flat-leaf parsley, chopped
2 eggs, lightly beaten
1/4 cup olive oil, for frying

1. Break cauliflower into florets and cook in boiling, salted water until soft. Drain and cool. 2. When cool, add flour, cheese, garlic and parsley. Mix to combine. 3. Add eggs and mix lightly. If the mixture is too dry to come together, add a little water. 4. Heat olive oil over medium heat in a fry pan. 5. Fry tablespoons of mixture until golden on one side; turn and slightly flatten with the back of a fork and fry the other side. They should take approximately 3 minutes to cook. 6. Eat hot or cold. They can also be made smaller to serve as canapés.

Note: Chopped green garlic shoots, when in season, can be used in place of the garlic clove.

STUFFED SARDINES

Serves 6 as an entrée

1 loaf day-old Italian bread
2 tbsp flat-leaf parsley, chopped
1 clove garlic
1 cup grated parmesan cheese
1 egg, lightly beaten
12 sardines, butterflied
plain flour, to coat before frying
olive oil, for frying
salt and pepper

1. Remove the insides of the bread and process in a food processor with garlic and parsley until it resembles fine breadcrumbs. 2. Turn into a bowl, add parmesan, salt and pepper, and egg. Stir lightly to bring together. It should be quite dry; if too moist add a little more breadcrumbs. 3. Hold a sardine in the palm of the hand, spread breadcrumb filling in centre and top with another sardine. Repeat with remaining ingredients. 4. Flour sardine 'sandwiches' lightly. 5. Heat olive oil over medium flame and pan-fry sardines for approximately 1 minute on either side.

PAN-FRIED ARTICHOKES

Serves 6 as an entrée

6 globe artichokes
2 spring onions
1 clove garlic
60ml white wine
salt and pepper
flat-leaf parsley, chopped for garnish

1. Remove tough outer leaves of artichokes, until only heart and tender leaves remain. Cut in half and scoop out the hairy choke. 2. Place prepared artichokes in acidulated water while preparing remaining artichokes (see note). Drain artichokes on a tea towel. 3. Fry spring onion and garlic in a little olive oil. As they start to brown, add artichokes. 4. Toss well. When spring onion and garlic start to slightly brown, add white wine. 5. Cover and allow to cook over a low heat until tender (10-15 minutes). 6. Remove lid, increase heat and cook for a few more minutes to allow most of the moisture to evaporate. 7. Season and serve with a sprinkle of chopped flat leaf parsley.

Note: Once cut, artichokes need to be covered with water containing a squeeze of lemon juice to prevent browning.