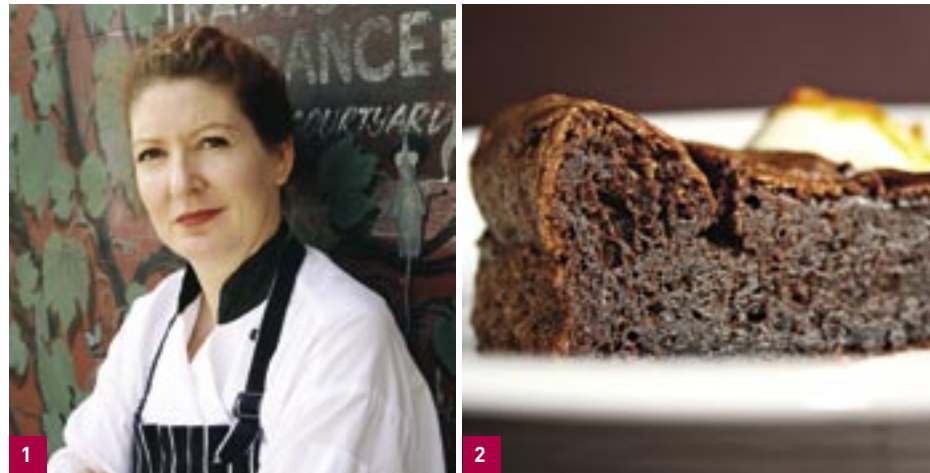


Strangers with Candy



Snagging the site of an old shopfront at the end of a tree-lined suburban street, Strangers with Candy began life as a café specialising in breakfast and lunch. The punters came in droves for the warm service, excellent coffee and on-site, home-made jams and relishes that complemented perfectly delivered meals. However, it wasn't long before the Strangers team — head chef and co-owner Veronica Stute and partner Justin Wells — extended the opening hours and began serving dinner. It was an instant hit.

One thing that hasn't changed is the casual, relaxed feel of the restaurant — you feel as if you're dining in a room full of family and friends (somewhat ironic given the restaurant's name). Certainly the dedicated service is full of warmth and generosity — the team at Strangers genuinely care for their customers and will go the extra mile to ensure everyone leaves happy.

The interior also emphasises this comfortable informality — long banquettes, polished floor boards, dark woods, plush mauve cushions and shelves stacked full of home-made goodies (much too tempting to resist). You can't help but linger well beyond the meal. But this homeliness is not something Stute and Wells deliberately set out to achieve — although now both see it as a reflection of their childhood as part of close-knit, food-loving families. Stute fondly recalls her mother "...cooking for eight of us kids, every night, usually with a big pot on the combustion stove" and no matter what, "mum always made sure to make dessert." Today, both love the fact that Strangers with Candy has become so family-friendly and that their customers always feel so welcome.

The food, in synch with the atmosphere of Strangers with Candy, is unfussy (no plated-up towers here), wholesome, seductive and inventive. Unafraid of bold flavours, Stute dishes up modern Australian fare with gusto — her tastes range from French-inspired duck confit, to the generously proportioned steamed snapper with coconut and lime custard (served, like an opened present, in its steaming bag). Crowd-pleasers, braised pork belly, tea-smoked salmon and prawn wontons also feature on a drool-worthy list.

Perhaps as a reflection on her sweet-toothed childhood, Stute has also created an adventurous dessert list so enticing, you'd be hard pressed to resist — who can turn down a steamed buttermilk and raspberry pudding, chocolate fudge cake, or lemon pancakes with poached pears and toffee ice cream?

All the warnings about strangers bearing candy were wrong — go ahead, dive in! ■ Paul McNally

1. Veronica Stute, head chef
2. Flourless chocolate cake

Steamed snapper with coconut & lime custard

Ingredients:

Coconut & lime custard

500ml Kara UHT coconut cream
1/2 stick of lemon grass, chopped finely
1 knob of fresh ginger, thin julienne
30g chopped palm sugar (light in colour)
1 tbs fish sauce

Fragrant broth

1 tbs red curry paste
2 long red chillies (deseeded and roughly chopped)
2 tbs fish sauce
2 tsp palm sugar
200ml chicken stock

Fish parcel

2 x 200-300g fresh white fish fillet (eg. snapper or barramundi)
2 leaves Chinese cabbage, roughly chopped
8 fresh shiitake mushrooms, sliced
8 wood ear mushrooms
4 shallots, chopped
2 x 50cm baking paper sheets, folded in half

Method:

For coconut and lime custard, bring all ingredients to the boil, then simmer and reduce until thick, stirring to prevent burning. Allow to cool then add fresh lime juice to taste.

For fragrant broth, blend ingredients in food processor, continue adding stock until a fragrant, spicy broth is achieved.

For fish parcel, preheat oven to 200°C. Place one piece of baking paper on a dinner plate (to prevent broth leaking). Place half of the Chinese cabbage in the middle, close to the fold. Place one piece of fish on top of cabbage. Pour over ½ a cup of fragrant broth. Scatter with shallot and assorted mushrooms. Secure the parcel by folding the top over. Starting from the left hand corner, use small folds to seal your parcel. Gently slide onto baking tray and cook in preheated oven at 200°C for 22 minutes.

To serve

Once cooked, transfer to a bowl style dinner plate, tear open the top of the parcel and garnish with fresh coriander leaves and serve coconut custard and fresh lime on the side.

[Serves 2]

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