

## Amazing culinary experience in Oz – hedonism on a higher level

*By Debi van Flymen CWM*

I had the incredible opportunity to travel to Australia, visiting a number of wine regions and then sail to New Zealand exploring Central Otago, Marlborough, Martinborough and Hawke's Bay by day, returning to the high seas each night. Everything I thought I knew about these regions I learned from textbooks, tastings and second hand accounts. One could liken that to browsing black and white photographs. Visiting in person meant living colour; colourful people, places, wines and experiences. There are so many stories to share, insight gained into the industry as a whole and from every angle – sommeliers and retailers to winemakers and distributors, plus seeing how wine service on a luxury cruise liner is managed and executed. There are exciting and experimental projects in all regions that parallel our own South African industry and global trends. Few of the wines tasted were jammy or over-extracted. I walked in a number of Australian vineyards that were over 100 years old; was reminded that New Zealand is the newest of new world producers with just 30 years of wine making history. The 25-day antipodean adventure was literally the trip of a lifetime.

Having been a chef and formerly firmly ensconced in the hospitality industry, one of my personal passions is pursuing food and wine pairing experiences. When a number of chef friends in Australia suggested trying Automata and then having wine loving friends and strangers echo that sentiment, I knew this was the indulgent experience and high note on which to end the journey. The spot is located in Sydney's Chippendale neighbourhood within The Old Clare Hotel. Enlisting a friend to join me was relatively painless. He even made the booking and requisite arrangements as I was mid ocean. All I had to do was show up with a palate ready to indulge. Looking back, this night was one of the highlights of my trip and left me feeling invigorated, excited and inspired.



Automata is the brainchild and first solo foray of co-owner and executive chef Clayton Wells. His previous experiences (including stints at Momofuku Seiōbo, Quay, Tetsuya's and Viajante in London) likely influenced the offering that can only be described as something gloriously different. There is a single menu - no options other than the optional cheese course! Drinks, an extensive wine list and hidden gems or put your faith in the hands of sommelier extraordinaire Tim Watkins. Tim's knowledge is vast and his experience broad providing perfect foil and fodder and making these two a dynamic duo. Dinner kicked off with bubbles (for those of you who know me well, that should not be a surprise) but a Chardonnay & Chenin Blanc based Limoux was quite the twist...

**Amuse-bouche:** dehydrated Barramundi and then deep-fried like a Chinese prawn cracker, served with enoki mushrooms marinated and then wrapped in guanciale, which literally melted in the mouth.

Wine pairing: Domaine J. Laurens



**First course:** Black plum, roasted beetroot, oxalis (borage) and mustard oil.

Wine pairing: Paltrinieri Leclisse. Take everything you thought you knew about Lambrusco and chuck it out the window. This was elegant, savoury and earthy with lifted notes of sour plums and sour cherries. Texturally and taste wise, it was a dream.



**Second course:** Mud crab, egg yolk, braised pumpkin seeds and white pepper broth.

Wine pairing: Miyako Bijin artisanal Sake. Think sweet tropical fruits and a relatively dense palate contrasting the weight of the soup and sweetness of crab, again playing with terrific textures.



**Third course:** Grilled beef heart, burnt onion, pepper berry pickles and thyme.

Wine pairing: Claus Preisinger Kalkstein Blaufränkisch - a beautiful biodynamic wine with tremendous energy and Beaujolais-like notes. Aromas of dark and earthy hedgerow berries with hint of spice were a great foil for the heart.



Here one must mention the exquisite freshly baked sourdough rolls which came to the table with the beef heart. It did not come alone. Whipped butter incorporating anchovies and chicken stock was a stroke of genius. Wish the photo came with scratch and sniff option.

**Fourth course:** Steamed bass proper, fermented red cabbage, mussel and herb broth.

Wine pairing: Good Intention Wine Co. 'Relatively White' - a Semillon/Sauvignon natural wine at just 11.5% alc. and made with skin contact. One of those wines where a glass is somehow just not enough. Textural play with the dish on steroids given the skin contact treatment. Note the crown cap closure on the bottle. Origin - Australia's Mount Gambier region.



**Fifth course:** optional cheese course - Quicke's cheddar, caramelised kiwi fruit, served with crisp flatbread

Wine pairing: Geyer Big Easy '16 from Barossa. Do not let the simplicity of the plate fool you into thinking this can be done at home. Just a word here - this should not be optional! It was fabulous and while glad we shared the portion, it helped to bring the meal to a crescendo. The wine was a perfect foil for the mature, nutty cheese and made from Montepulciano, Petit Verdot and Mataro with splashes of Shiraz and Grenache. Juicy with ripe (not jammy) red and darker fruits, lengthy spice and earthy quality with well-integrated seam of acidity.



**Sixth course:** Macadamia sorbet, black sesame, crème fraîche and strawberries. This party on the palate was sublime.

Wine pairing: Artisanal Sake, Mukai Shuzo Ine Mankei made from rare red rice by Japan's first woman Toji (i.e. master brewer). Delicate, floral top notes with hint of tropical berries definitely enhanced the nuttiness of the dish – a strong finish to our magical evening.



Add Automata to your next Sydney dining experience. Polished service, boundary pushing food and wine with single set menu nightly. Come with an open mind and spoil yourself.