

WEEKEND DINING



The delicious ritual

OUT OF 10

Food 9 Real food, real flavours, really well cooked.
Atmosphere 7 You want double damask, go somewhere else. You want noise and fun, this is the place.
Value 9 For about \$30 a head, we don't know how they do it - but hope they don't stop.
Service 7 Quick, slick and unobtrusive.

PHOTOS: SAHLAN HAYES

JOHN NEWTON leaves Little Portugal singing hallelujah after an encounter with food fundamentalism.

SILVAS
Shop 1/82 New Canterbury Road,
Petersham, 9572 9911
Open Tue-Sun for lunch from 10.30am
and dinner from 5.30pm

The reaction to complex times, we're told, is a retreat to certainty, simplicity, old values. Given the name fundamentalism, it generally gets bad press. But I'd like to draw attention to the upside. Food fundamentalism. Or, to give it another name, real food.

Are we over the jittery innovation of Modern Australian cooking? At its worst, it means culturally confused dishes with paragraph-long descriptions ("Our own sundried tomato fettuccine, fetta, olives and Asian vegetables in a roma tomato sauce"). Lately, as I go out to eat, the restaurants bulging with happy campers are those serving simple, time-tested dishes from cultures where food plays a big - fundamental, even - part in the joy of living.

This Saturday night we're on the strip of New Canterbury Road that starts at Audley Street and runs a couple of blocks to West Street, aka Little Portugal. If any cuisine can be said to define real food, this is it.

Crossing New Canterbury Road, the delicious smell of fried fish cuts through the traffic fumes. Silvas, our destination,

turns out to be both takeaway, selling good-looking charcoal chicken and chips from a glass-fronted counter, and a colourful restaurant open to the street on two sides with a tiled floor and bare wooden tables. There are six of us and we're hungry. It looks as though we've come to the right place.

Having been briefed on the must-eat dishes by a Silvas fan, I'm entrusted with the menu. The corks are pulled on a couple of bottles of Casal Garcia Vinho Verde, the low-alcohol white wine of Portugal - simple, fresh and made for the food.

The owners of Silvas are from the island of Madeira (there's a large and enticing mural on the wall) and seafood is important, so we start with a mess of grilled cuttlefish, barbecued octopus, sardines and a special of unshelled king prawns in a shallot and lemon sauce. To follow, another Madeirense specialty, the espetada, a sword-sized skewer of rump steak cubes; a grilled snapper; and one of the cuisine's surf and turf specialties, porco alentejana, a stew of pork fillet with little pippis, here called vongole.

My real-food theory is being borne out here. Large tables full of Portuguese families and Aussies of various ages and stations, including one gent with an alarming resemblance to the late great Leo McKern of Rumpole fame, tuck in heartily.

That's another characteristic of the real-food revolution: relaxation. There's no nervousness about the food; you know what you're getting, so settle. We six don't know each other that well, but after a couple of glasses of vinho verde, tongues loosen, yarns are exchanged and we're instant old friends.

Talking of old friends, here comes the food. And what food. Bountiful servings of perfectly char-grilled, olive oil-brushed cuttlefish, little sardines smothered in sweated red pepper, plump barbecued young octopus - all with more than a passing acquaintance with the garlic clove. Eating is interspersed with exclamations of pleasure.

Now it's the turn of the larger dishes and the first thing to hit the table is the stainless steel hanger for the espetada, which arrives soon after. Chunks of marinated medium-rare rump, char-blackened on one edge, slide off the sword and disappear quickly. It's the best beef I've tasted for some time.

The grilled snapper is also done to perfection, quickly followed by a large pot



of tender pork fillet with vongole in a rich, dark sauce. Can it get better? You bet. Anyone who loves bacalhau would recognise this example - bacalhau a lagareiro - as being perfectly prepared (the most important part: properly soaked and poached to get rid of the excess salt), grilled, scattered with garlic chips and surrounded by batatas a murro, baked new potatoes with skin on, bashed flat and seasoned with olive oil and garlic.

But wait. We spot three perfect Portuguese tarts from Sweet Belem across the road. Slice 'em in half and bring coffee, please. We don't want to leave. We linger, telling bad jokes. Our waiter, George, sends out glasses of Licor Beirao, a gentle anise. Eventually, begrudgingly, we go.