



# SLOW IT DOWN UNDER

Take a seat at Australia’s food table with celebrated Vancouver chef Andrea Carlson

LUCY HYSLOP

It’s like a rogue episode of Top Chef. We’re 55 floors above the Melbourne skyline — a double rainbow appearing right on cue — savouring morsels of South Australian abalone along with a Sydney rock oyster, jasmine and finger-lime koshu at Vue de monde restaurant when the impeccable team suddenly whisks us into the kitchen.

Passing weapons-grade Japanese white-oak charcoal burners and basalt marble counters, they hand over pestle-and-mortar duties to us: my fellow traveller Andrea Carlson, one of Canada’s most vaunted chefs and restaurateur of Vancouver’s Michelin-starred Burdock & Co, and me — er, a slothful cook at best.

The liquid nitrogen crisping up the rose petals and fennel flowers we’re pounding — its fog hanging over our Chartreuse liquor glasses — feels more like my embarrassment externalizing as our mandarin-sorbet-fused creations sit side by side. Mine? Jackson Pollock-esque. Carlson’s? Exquisite.

Coming back down to earth, the immersive interlude turned out to be higher octane than the rest of our meander through southern Australia. It’s all linked, however, by one thread: how joyously (and loudly) Aussies celebrate their bounty of homegrown food and the people behind it, an echo of Carlson’s own 30-year *modus operandi*.

With Melbourne swirling in myriad culinary cultures — cosmopolitan, yet less showy than its cousin Sydney — little wonder there’s a cavalcade of chefs inviting such a kindred spirit into their kitchens to help her “glean the essence of Australian food” for a road-trip menu back in B.C.

Pinballing through quirky clothing stores and Vietnamese eateries in the city’s suburb of Richmond the next day, it’s the wonderfully sweet aroma of homemade fish sauce that first hits you at Anchovy. Following her locavore’s dream to craft it herself, chef Thi Lee helped fishers haul in nearly a ton of anchovies at the local port. Now she’s still fermenting iterations of Project: Fish Sauce in barrels of salt three years on, all evoking the spirit of slow food. (Put simply, it’s the opposite of fast food. Started in Italy in the 1980s, the movement’s ethos is “good, clean and fair food for all.”)

With Carlson’s supertaster palate, as the first female chef to own a restaurant with a Michelin star in Canada and retaining it four years in a row to boot, it’s like journeying alongside a flavour thesaurus as she inhales everyone’s dishes before we tuck in.

If you go, do not leave Anchovy without trying the Bánh xèo savoury pancake or pipi clams, Lee’s nod to Viet Kieu, an alchemy of being a “Vietnamese overseas” and Australian.

We may burn off a few calories running around the Botanical Gardens and the architectural showpiece of Flinders Street station’s iconic clocks downtown, but in food-obsessed Melbourne it’s always time to refuel.

Even so, it’s outside of the city where spring’s ingredients (the season runs from September to November here) tease us most.

From the foamy waves of edible tea tree blossoms and pigface suc-



Clare Falzon, left, and Andrea Carlson prepare passion fruit custard tart at staguni in the Barossa Valley near Adelaide. PHOTOS: TOURISM AUSTRALIA



Duck salad and duck liver pate with strawberry at Ondeem restaurant.



A staguni feast: pipi clams and roasted cabbage with porcini butter.



Kangaroos serve as unofficial tour guides on the Barragunda estate on the Mornington Peninsula near Melbourne.



Slow food, fast talking. Writer Lucy Hyslop, left, and Burdock & Co chef Andrea Carlson at Ondeem in the Adelaide Hills.

culents to cute fingers unfurling on Buddha’s hand citrus fruit, we luxuriate in slow time in Victoria and South Australia states’ farming landscapes — both far greener than I’d pictured in the heat of Down Under.

Steps away from the recently opened Barragunda Dining restaurant an hour southeast of Melbourne, we can’t help snapping off green almonds for cocktails and salads before swooping down to take in the headiness of cut leaf mint bush and native oregano.

“The abundance of local produce here — and the growers’ passions — is dizzying,” Carlson enthuses, nibbling on a native, tastes-as-it-sounds saltbush herb.

Even a couple of kangaroos seem equally enthusiastic, acting as unofficial tour guides; a prickly echid-

na less so, hiding his head under a shrub.

An easy hour’s flight away is Adelaide. It’s hugged by another Botanic Garden showcasing iconic eucalyptus, or river red gum, and boasts a rollcall of festivals. But it’s also the jumping off point for the serious epicurean playgrounds of the Barossa Valley, Adelaide Hills and McLaren Vale.

For Barossa’s Clare Falzon, who recently opened staguni (meaning seasons in Maltese which riffs on her family’s heritage), it’s all about “holding up not just the produce, but the people who grow it” when talking about the mind-set of Australian cuisine.

“We are aware that those who make our food are probably the hardest working people in the

country,” she continues while creating for us what I think is a beef pie beloved here but turns out to be sumptuous, spiced lamb (a twist on North Africa’s influences on Malta) in phyllo pastry.

It’s a story that continues at the Adelaide Hills’ culinary haven of Ondeem, a restored 1851 homestead that wants the community to be part of its slow-food, sense-of-place roots. It frequently uses native plants supplied by Indigenous growers (the only ones allowed to forage for them in the wild).

“We grow what we can and then go to the local market regularly, which is normal for South Australia — we’ve great access to amazing growers and there’s not much reason to bring any-

thing else in,” says Kane Pol-lard, Ondeem’s culinary director and chef leader of Slow Food Australia, walking through a restaurant packed with locals like much of our trip. “It’s all about building Australia’s food personality.”

There’s no doubt I’ll boomerang back across the dateline for that personality soon. Until then, under the pull of a Northern Hemisphere moon, Carlson’s menu will be a perfect way to relive that salubrious joy.

*Michelin-starred Burdock & Co (burdockandco.com), 2702 Main St., Vancouver, launches its limited time, Australian-inspired Road Trip under a Cold Moon menu in December and January.*

*Lucy Hyslop was a guest of Tourism Australia, which did not preview this story before publication.*