

GLAM TIDINGS

With an eye to the heyday of glamorous restaurants, Martin Benn and Vicki Wild are set to bring back the good times and put fun on the menu at their highly anticipated new restaurant, writes ANTHONY HUCKSTEP.

At Sepia in Sydney they altered our perceptions of dining at the pointy end by raising the volume on audaciously avant-garde food and pinpoint-precision service. Now Martin Benn and Vicki Wild plan something even bolder at their next restaurant.

The new venture, a collaboration with restaurateur Chris Lucas (patron of Chin Chin and Kisume among other establishments), is slated to open mid-next year in Melbourne's glossy new 80 Collins Street development, and Benn and Wild say they won't be replicating Sepia. Rather, they aim to revive the very essence of restaurant experiences - fun with a capital F.

"We'll offer a sense of occasion, free from the finer-dining trappings but big on fun," says Wild. "We're dialling back the fussiness when it comes to service and atmosphere. It's about the art of hospitality, about guests indulging and feeling like they're somewhere special."

They cite famed '80s glamour couple Tina and Michael Chow - she once a noted model, he a restaurateur and founder of the Mr Chow restaurants. A photo of the pair by Helmut Newton sees Tina bound with rope and tied to a bar, the inspiration for our cover shot.

"The use of unfurling rope on Martin was really to say he no longer has the constraints of small business, that he no longer feels he has to conform to what is expected of fine dining."

Another inspiration was Manhattan restaurant Le Bernardin. "We've always loved big-city restaurants, especially those that make you feel like dressing up," says Wild. "One of our favourite nights ever in a restaurant was the first time we went to Le Bernardin. It was so welcoming and comfortable, and the staff were so relaxed. They didn't tell us about every ingredient or the chef's philosophy; it felt like the night was all about us. Everyone was having fun - it felt like a party."

The couple were lured to Melbourne after more than two decades in Sydney, where they worked at Tetsuya's before opening Sepia. "The European

sensibilities are prevalent, as well as the contemporary modernity of Australia," says Wild. "This enables us to create the restaurant we've always wanted - sophisticated yet accessible, elegant yet fun."

After a decade at the helm of one of Australia's most-awarded and internationally recognised fine-diners, Benn and Wild seem well qualified to redefine the restaurant experience.

"Many people have forgotten what restaurants are actually for," says Benn. "Restaurants that make you want to become a regular, that lure you back for the charcoal-grilled scampi with yuzu mayonnaise, say, or roasted flounder meunière with seaweed butter," he says, perhaps hinting at the sort of food we can expect. "A place where you sit in comfort and feel, for a couple of hours, happier to be alive than when you first walked in."

Benn is revelling in the thought of not conforming to what's expected in high-end dining these days. What might that look like? For a start, the à la carte menu is back in a big way. "It will allow guests to decide what and how much to order," he says.

He'll serve the same avant-garde style he's renowned for - reimagining classic dishes, often referencing Japan - with a focus on local seafood. Benn's original plan for Sepia - which made it to 84th on the World's Best Restaurants list - was an upscale seafood restaurant, but fate saw it follow another direction. He's thrilled to return to that dream.

"I've spent the majority of my career passionate about evolving the craft of seafood cookery and by incorporating my Japanese sensibilities I've been able to create my unique style," he says. "This restaurant is a logical move - not only is Australia blessed with an abundance of extraordinary seafood, but we're internationally recognised for our seafood excellence."

And while the emphasis will be on fun and theatre, the commitment to sustainable seafood and excellence remains. For meat-eaters, meanwhile, Benn is working on a new way of slow-roasting a rib of beef among other things.

On the second floor of the new tower, the restaurant will be grand in scale. The space is generous in proportion, says Wild, with intimate spaces and 10-metre windows overlooking outdoor gardens and Collins Street. "It's very 'big city' and powerful," she says. "The interiors are moody luxe in a very relaxed 2020 way, but the emphasis is on comfort."

The party will be aided and abetted by an extensive wine list devised by Lucas that will celebrate great Australian wines while also being long on Champagne and Burgundy.

The restaurant isn't just about their ambition to create something special for the city, though. It's also about developing the next generation of chefs and restaurateurs.

"Chris is changing my life as a chef - allowing me to fulfil my dreams in the industry - so I can build restaurants that are sustainable for the people

who work with me, so it changes their life as well as mine," Benn says.

"To be surrounded by like-minded enablers is invigorating."

He and Wild aim to inspire the next generation of chefs and front-of-house personnel, teaching them how to run a hospitality business and, in turn, become our next leaders.

"We have a long-term vision with this restaurant - to be fully immersed in Melbourne society," says Wild.

"And ultimately, we want to toast the return of real restaurants. They're magic places where exciting things can happen."

Let the party begin! ★
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WHERE'S THE PARTY?

Vicki Wild and Martin Benn in the Chablis Bar at Chris Lucas's Kisumé. Opposite: architectural rendering of the 80 Collins Street development.

ON THE COVER: MARTIN WEARS TOM FORD SHELTON JACKET (\$5,890), PANTS (\$1,690), SHIRT (\$695) & BOW TIE (\$325), ALL FROM HARROLD'S (HARROLD'S.COM.AU). VICKI WEARS THE VAMPIRE'S WIFE DRESS (\$2,395), VICKI SARGE RING (\$450) & EARRINGS (\$395), VICTORIA BECKHAM HEELS (\$395), ALL FROM CHRISTINE (CHRISTINEACCESSORIES.COM). **THIS PAGE:** MARTIN WEARS PRADA JACKET (\$4,560) & SHIRT (\$930), CORNELIANI PANTS (\$550), ALL FROM MASON'S MENSWEAR BOUTIQUE (MASONSOFFICIAL.COM). VICKI WEARS THE VAMPIRE'S WIFE DRESS (\$2,495), ST ERASMUS NECKLACE (\$595) & EARRINGS (\$250), VICKI SARGE RING (\$350), LANVIN RING (\$450), VICTORIA BECKHAM HEELS (\$395), ALL FROM CHRISTINE.