



Sydney Morning Herald

Tuesday 22/04/2014

Page: 5  
Section: Good Food  
Region: Sydney, AU  
Circulation: 131737  
Type: Capital City Daily  
Size: 633.00 sq.cms.



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The Sydney Morning Herald

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# A package trip to Italy

**T**here's a nifty new package on offer at the newly reinvented La Scala in Jersey Road. No, it's not the BYO Monday promo, which allows you to dust off that bottle of red under the stairs and bring it in. Nor is it their Dine Free On Your Birthday offer, or their Children Under 12 Years Dine Free deal.

Instead, it's a grill-marked, folded-over pizza that's half calzone and half piadina, plumped up with a creamy, smoky, totally moreish ham and ricotta cheese filling (\$15) and served with a splodge of good tomato sugo.

What makes this little half-moon package so irresistible, is that it so clearly isn't the product of an egotistical celebrity chef flitting in on a guest appearance. Instead, it simply comes across as a highly enjoyable plate of food from an Italian chef channelling his childhood and heritage.

As, indeed it is. Massimo Mele, born in Tasmania, reared in Naples and trained in Melbourne, has moved into the kitchen that once housed the talented Darren Simpson and Ruben Martinez. You may remember him as the exec chef of Hugos Bar and Pizza a couple of years back. Or you may not. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that what he is doing now is extremely likeable.

Mele and newly installed bar manager Julian Serna (formerly of Morrison Bar & Oyster Room) have joined affable restaurant manager, Andrew Carson, to reinvigorate this once-hot, first floor Italian. The dramatic Annie Snell design has been scrubbed up, the tables de-clothed and the memorable motifs of fringed ceilings, spiral staircase and pink powder room retained. It's a nice spot to be, with its sunny outlook by day and candle-lit tables by night.

Mele's food doesn't try to be hipster Italian or alto cucina; instead, it's casalinga, from the home. So Suffolk lamb (\$34) from

Cowra isn't flash-roasted and served with decorative effects, but slow-cooked until melting, then quickly cooked again to order, served with a thick, punchy emulsion of salsa verde. It wouldn't make the cover of a gourmet magazine, but it has a hearty, unpretentious appeal. There are three inviting pasta combinations, from meat-free orecchiette with roasted eggplant, pesto and caciocavallo, to strozzapreti with pork, veal, cavolo nero, onions and pecorino. For me, it's the big, floppy, lazy lumachone (\$28). In one of those contradictory miracles of the Italian kitchen, the snail-shaped pasta shells are almost crisply, beautifully al dente, yet they loll about in a very satisfying tomato sugo, sharing couch space with a few soft/crunchy curls of fresh Spencer Gulf prawn. Being seafood, the dish is topped with crunchy pangrattato breadcrumbs rather than cheese.

Serna's inventive cocktails, including an Itsy Bitsy Bellini of peach, ginger, lychee and prosecco, are supplemented by a hard-working wine list of Australian labels and a few reliable Italians, including a crisp, citrusy 2011 Umani Ronchi Villa Bianchi verdicchio (\$58).

There isn't anything particularly groundbreaking about a fig, mozzarella and



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## La Scala on Jersey

**Address** Corner of Jersey Road and Melrose Lane, Woollahra

**Phone** 9357 0815  
lascalaonjersey.com.au

**Open** Dinner Mon-Sat from 6pm

**Cost** About \$115 for two, plus drinks

**Best bit:** The glamorous private dining room for larger groups.

**Worst bit:** Not open for lunch.

**Go-to dish:** Grilled pizza “street food” with smoked ham, ricotta, parmesan, tomato, \$15.

prosciutto salad (\$18), but the composition is immediately pleasing. And a torta caprese (\$12) once again displays that effortless Italian talent for raising the simple and modest to the ridiculously good. The modest round of flourless chocolate cake is light, yet as rich as hell, topped with a smooth scoop of creamy walnut and honey ice-cream.

There’s a modesty and charm about eating here that lingers long after the bill has been paid and the steep stairs negotiated. The enjoyable food, pleasant space, can-do service and neighbourly promotional offers all taken into account, it’s a pretty good package.

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### How we score

Of 20 points, 10 are awarded for food, five for service, three for ambience, two for wow factor.

12 Reasonable 13 Solid and satisfactory 14 Good 15 Very good 16 Seriously good 17 Great 18 Excellent 19 Outstanding 20 The best of the best  
Restaurants are reviewed again for *The Sydney Morning Herald Good Food Guide* and scores may vary.



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