



# LA DOLCE VITA DOWN UNDER

*From breakfast with kangaroos in the Blue Mountains to a 16-course dinner at Sydney's top table, **Anita Carmin** finds New South Wales' culinary scene diverse, vibrant, and cutting-edge cool.*

Stodgy roasts, mushy vegetables, and canned lager? Australian food may have suffered a bad (“like British food, only worse”) rap in the past, but times have changed. Today, you’ll find quail with seared sea scallops, soy glazed duck breast with caramelized black fig, and confit of Tasmanian ocean trout on your dinner plate — complemented, of course, by world-renowned Australian wines.

I say this with authority as I eat my way through New South Wales, one of the planet’s premier foodie destinations due to its abundance of fresh produce and seafood, spectacular wine regions, and a wealth of world-class, multicultural chefs.

What brings me — and boyfriend Robert — to this seductive corner of the world? A two-week New Zealand-to-Australia cruise (see *Virtuoso Insights*, Aug./Sep. 2009), that we’ve decided to top off with a four-day gourmet excursion beginning in Sydney, a city that clearly has it

all: drop-dead-gorgeous scenery; friendly, good-natured residents; a cosmopolitan verve coupled with a laid-back beach vibe; and a smoking-hot culinary scene. It’s the down-under version of la dolce vita.

In a perfect world, we would spend a week or so exploring Sydney and its environs, but our time here is short — and we have a lot we want to see, sip, and sink our teeth into. Jill Atherton, EuroPanache’s Sydney-based wizard of Oz, has worked her magic and personal connections to give us a rich yet easily digestible taste of the region’s highlights. First course: a personalized private city tour. Our driver/guide Glenn Wendt is a delightful and engaging host (read: no canned commentary or corny jokes) as he deftly navigates Sydney traffic, pointing out and stopping at the must-sees: Observatory Hill, Darling Harbour, Sydney Opera House, Mrs. Macquarie’s Chair, The Rocks, Hyde Park.

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**Clockwise from upper left:** A feast for the eyes: sweet red muscat wine, or Australian “sticky”; blintz with sour cream, red caviar, and sliced cucumber; fresh figs; scallops on the half-shell; and the Sydney Opera House and Harbour Bridge at sunset.



**From top:** Tetsuya Wakuda's roasted lamb with miso; Chef "Tets" in his eponymous restaurant; and Sydney's sparkling skyline.



We pass by Nicole Kidman's and Russell Crowe's waterfront digs, cruise down Castlereagh Street, the Rodeo Drive of Sydney, and make a special trip to up-and-coming Danks Street, a hip arts hub with nine galleries under one roof. I'm dying to nosh at nearby Sopra, the happening café attached to Fratelli Fresh, where Sydney foodies and chefs shop for handmade pastas, unusual produce, and all manner of gourmet goodies. But we're conserving our appetites for this evening's gustatory marathon.

**Don't ask me how, but Jill managed to snag the best table at Tetsuya's for our eagerly awaited,** 16-course degustation dinner. This was no small feat, as Tetsuya Wakuda's eponymous restaurant is so acclaimed — many rate it the best restaurant in Australia, if not the planet — that it can take months to secure a reservation. It helps that Jill is on a first-name basis with "Tets," who makes an impromptu visit to our table to say hello and oblige us with a photo.

Japanese-born Tetsuya arrived in Sydney in 1982 with a small suitcase, a limited grasp of English, and little awareness of Australia other than "there were lots of koalas and kangaroos around." He's indicative of the industrious immigrants who have made Sydney the dynamic multicultural city that it is. After seven years in the restaurant business, he opened his own place, where foodies immediately embraced his elegant and eclectic dishes marrying French cooking techniques with a Japanese penchant for seasonal flavors. A perfect example: Tetsuya's signature confit of Tasmanian ocean trout, which tonight is served with a kelp, apple, daikon, and wasabi salad. This is followed by a terrine of Queensland spanner crab with avocado; grilled fillet of barramundi with braised baby fennel; and twice-cooked spatchcock with gobo (burdock root).

From start (chilled corn soup with saffron and vanilla ice cream) to finish (chocolate ganache with green tea and red beans), each course is a delicate work of art. What's more, the degustations provide an opportunity to taste a wide range of Australian varietals. And since our short stay doesn't allow for a wine country excursion, Robert and I relish the opportunity to sample everything from a 2003 Clover Hill Blanc de Blanc, a sparkling chardonnay produced in northeast Tasmania, to a lovely 2003 Parker Estate Terra Rossa Cabernet Sauvignon from South Australia's Coonawarra region.

It's nearly midnight by the time we head back to The Observatory Hotel, which comes highly recommended due to its ideal location in the historic Rocks District. Not only is The Observatory close to all the city's famous sites and culinary attractions, it's a foodie destination in and of itself, offering Galileo, Sydney's leading five-star hotel restaurant. There's also the stylish Martini Club, the ideal retreat for sipping signature martinis and enjoying Rat Pack classics.

## WE EVEN MANAGE TO POLISH OFF TWO DESSERTS BEFORE OUR SEAPLANE RETURNS TO WHISK US BACK TO SYDNEY.

While Sydney is stunning on the ground, it's spectacular by air. Which is why EuroPanache has arranged a morning seaplane flight showcasing not only the world's most photographed harbor, but also the series of breathtaking beaches hugging the northern coastline. After 20 minutes aloft, we land dockside at Cottage Point Inn, once a boatshed and general store, now an award-winning restaurant perched on the water's edge in the heart of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. A more tranquil setting does not exist, and barely 12 hours after our last repast, we're ordering a pinot noir from Western Australia to accompany our three-course lunch on the deck.

We begin with chilled tomato and basil soup, topped with white anchovies, cucumber jelly, avocado puree, and Yarra Valley salmon roe. Robert chooses the Hiramasa kingfish fillet for his main course; I opt for the soy glazed duck breast with caramelized black fig. We even manage to polish off two desserts — a feather-light banana and honey soufflé and an exquisite Tunisian orange cake — before our seaplane returns to whisk us back to Sydney.

**Our schedule allows for one more Aussie adventure: a trip to the majestic Blue Mountains National Park,** located just 90 minutes outside of Sydney. Named a World Heritage Site in 2000, the Greater Blue Mountains Area attracts outdoor enthusiasts and gourmands alike as chefs here outdo each other, showcasing the fresh local produce in a variety of innovative ways. We have reservations at Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa, the former nineteenth-century summer retreat of Sir Frederick Darley, who could not have chosen a better site on which to build his Euro-style country estate. Surrounded by two acres of lush English gardens, it's just a stone's throw from the famous Three Sisters, the oft-photographed sandstone formation that towers above the Jamison Valley.

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**From top:** The majestic Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa; and a real cliffhanger.

Robert and I take full advantage of our time here. We descend the Giant Stairway — a series of 800-plus steps, many hewn out of the cliff — to the valley, then ride the world’s steepest railway back to the top. The following morning, we embark with local guide Tim Tranter on a 6:00 a.m. private eco tour to observe kangaroos in the wild. Kangaroos dine early in the morning, as do we — on fresh-out-of-the-oven pumpkin, honey, and orange juice scones served with steaming hot coffee from the back of Tim’s 4X4.

Later, we indulge in the six-course tasting menu with matching Australian wines at Darley’s, Lilianfels’ signature restaurant. It is the beginning of autumn in Australia and Executive Chef Hugh Whitehouse has created a seasonal menu incorporating the best-of-the-best local produce, nuts, late-season berries, and ripe black figs. There’s wild barramundi on tonight’s degustation menu, served with Hawkesbury River squid, baby leeks, and Jerusalem artichokes. There’s also quail with seared sea scallops and barberries, and a delicate Northern Rivers milk-fed veal with white asparagus and local walnuts.

Tonight’s meal is the perfect finale to our culinary odyssey. Traveling via foot, 4X4, train, and seaplane, we’ve covered a lot of gourmet territory in the past four days. Now, just one last question remains.

*“What’s for dessert?”*

## DOING IT SAVORING NEW SOUTH WALES

### GO

**Qantas Airlines** offers a number of non-stop flights to Sydney from San Francisco and Los Angeles, along with daily-direct service from New York (JFK) via LA. In addition, a variety of cruise lines feature itineraries that begin or end in Sydney, presenting the perfect opportunity to visit this exciting city. *Your Virtuoso travel advisor can help select the cruise that’s right for you.*

### SEE

Calling on its innumerable local connections, **EuroPanache** works with your Virtuoso travel advisor to create customized programs and unique experiences perfectly tailored to your interests — from culinary adventures in the Blue Mountains to private winery tours in the Hunter Valley.

### STAY SYDNEY

Located in Sydney’s historic Rocks District, **The Observatory Hotel, an Orient-Express Hotel**, is just a short stroll from the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the iconic Opera House, and the vibrant restaurants of King Street Wharf. The 100 individually decorated guestrooms include 12 stylish suites. (Our favorite: #313, a junior suite with a wraparound terrace.) The renowned Day Spa features a subterranean indoor swimming pool lit by a fiber-optic “galaxy” of twinkling stars. In Galileo, Executive Chef Masahiko Yomoda offers fine French dining with surprising international influences. Virtuoso guests receive a room upgrade on arrival, if available; breakfast daily; fresh strawberries upon arrival; and early check-in and late checkout, if available. *Contact your Virtuoso travel advisor for up-to-the-minute pricing.*

### STAY THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

Set on a cliff top overlooking the breathtaking Blue Mountains, **Lilianfels Blue Mountains Resort & Spa, an Orient-Express Hotel**, draws outdoor lovers and foodies alike. The historic retreat offers indoor and outdoor pools, a luxurious spa, and the award-winning Darley’s Restaurant serving contemporary Australian cuisine. A more casual dining option, The Grille, has earned the coveted reputation of serving the best steaks in the Blue Mountains. The hotel concierge can arrange everything from gourmet picnics to “Breakfast with the Kangaroos” eco tours. Virtuoso guests receive a room upgrade on arrival, if available; Continental breakfast daily; welcome gift upon arrival; and early check-in and late checkout, if available. *Contact your Virtuoso travel advisor for up-to-the-minute pricing.*