

The Cooks Larder

By Helen Greenwood
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Smart northern beaches deli-cafe does great food - to eat in or out.

Address

Shop 1, 21-23 Old Barrenjoey Rd, Avalon

Phone

(02) 9973 4370

Style

Cafes

Cuisine

Cafe Fare

Hours

Daily 8am-3.30pm; Friday dinner 6.30pm-late

Details

BYO, Outdoor Seating

Payment

Cash

Price Guide

Main course, cake and coffee about \$28



You can't beat it - the red wall at The Cooks Larder.

Photo: *Natalie Boog*

There's a fun fair going on at Avalon when we arrive on a very warm Saturday. Face painting, a jumping castle, a newly elected member of parliament pressing the flesh.

The carnival mood wafts along the main street of this northern beaches suburb where people dress in a fashionable, Noosa-resort kind of way.

Boutiques with trendy clothes and homewares beckon, cafes are full and we've got a comfortable vantage point outside one of them, the Cooks Larder.

Under a shady eucalypt that meets a cantilevered overhang, we have scored one of half a dozen white tables. At another table, a famous fashion designer, also clad in white, dons large black sunglasses and talks intimately to her male companion. A middle-aged film industry bloke and his theatre director companion order coffees and chat to friends.

But I'm more taken with the look of our cafe. Someone with a great eye for detail has combined pantry products with quaint kitchen collectibles. It turns out to be one of the owners, Sam Mackie, who has conjured up the atmosphere of an old-fashioned larder in a modern setting.

There's the tomato-red feature wall that has a row of old-fashioned egg beaters suspended in front of it. There's the pannier basket with cotton tea towels for sale outside the generous open doorway that runs along the full frontage of the cafe. There are the distressed wood tables that serve as waiters' stations and display counters for the cooking implements, condiments and cookbooks.

A well-loved metal cake-stand doubles as a magazine rack and an old, painted meat safe holds jams. There is a vintage wooden baker's trolley with packets of pasta and dried muscat grapes and those little bottles of Italian drinks for sale.

You can also buy bread, Asian products, jams, biscuits and a host of essential cooking supplies. A large refrigerated counter holds choice smallgoods, cheeses and antipasti ingredients.

The deli is no token effort and neither is the cafe. Large blackboards with legible chalk lettering announce specials and loads of desirable cakes. The lunch menu is as playful and as eclectic as the layout.

Spices ring through the dishes: coriander seed, sumac, chervil, chilli and five spice. Garnishes and condiments such as lemon zest and fried capers, pomegranate dressing and cranberry and onion compote, play high notes to the base notes of smoky eggplant and artichoke salad, confit duck leg, chicken tenderloins, lamb burger, tofu, risotto and angel hair pasta.

The chicken with a lemon and coriander-seed dressing and the lamb burger on toasted ciabatta are well-made, safe bets for girly girls and blokes who like meat. The dressing on the chicken has ginger and honey that add depth, the burger has a relish that adds balance and the bread is from the excellent Sonoma bakery.

They are not the favourites, though. More interesting is the duck confit with spiced peaches, spinach leaves and sugared pecans. Vanilla rounds out the fruit and adds a complexity to the not-too-fatty duck, which has pepper and five spice rubbed on its skin. A light dressing finishes it off. The spatchcock is spring-fresh with a romesco sauce of just-cooked tomatoes and capsicum. The bird is moist with a grilled skin made aromatic with garlic and cinnamon and rosewater, then sprinkled with almond shards.

Many of the ingredients on the menus have pedigrees, either handmade (Meredith fetta, organic greens) or homemade (labne, relishes and compotes). The same provenance shows up in the cakes, which would break the resolve of the most hardened dieter.

Lumberjack cake is from a secret family recipe. Danish-style apple cake comes with homemade apple jelly and raspberry teacake has a homemade raspberry jam. Syrup cakes such as the Moroccan almond and lime, or the flourless orange and almond, echo the Med-Mid-Mod Oz mix.

The result is a cuisine that seems as though it has been whipped up from the cupboards of an instinctive cook - which is exactly what the name promises.

The cook behind the larder is Susie Doran, whose own pedigree includes working at Lunch in Castlecrag with Annie Parmentier. She and fellow cook Linda Irvin (formerly of the Beach Road Cafe) and owners Sam and Dugal Mackie deliver a marvellous package, the kind of place that Elizabeth David, Alice Waters and Margaret Fulton might dream up if they ever met. Now, there's a fun thought.

Out of 10

Food 8 Seemingly instinctive, seemingly effortless, but there's good provenance behind every dish and behind the stove.

Service 8 Smiling as if they've just come in from a good day at the beach - and no doubt they have.

Atmosphere 9 Personality plus. Love the egg beaters dangling in a row, the cooking classes and the deli items.

Value 8 You can load up with a main course, cake and coffee for about \$28. BYO.

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