Sydney's well-named restaurants

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Australia has made a series of significant contributions to the world's restaurants.

The first has been the export of raw talent in the shape of young chefs and waiters. John Torode, Michael Benyan and Brett Graham decided to stay and Smiths of Smithfield, the Zetter Townhouse and The Ledbury are their respective contributions to London's reputation.

This wave was accompanied by the export of some really excellent-value Australian wine that brightened up many a restaurant wine list. This has been superseded by the introduction of 'flying winemakers' into what were often underperforming co-operatives in France, Italy and Spain that has had a highly beneficial impact on their wines and raised standards throughout Europe.

But over a long weekend at the Crave Food Festival in Sydney, I began to appreciate another Australian talent. Whether it is their notable directness, or the proximity of such natural beauty, this city's chefs and restaurateurs have an enviable knack of choosing the most suitable, easily memorable and pertinent names for their restaurants.

I began to appreciate this skill (and names are crucially important for a restaurant to be successful) as our taxi swept round the bay of Bondi Beach and dropped us outside **Sean's Panaroma**, a landmark for the past 19 years thanks to Nature and Sean Moran.

When it opened, the view - panorama in fact - would have encompassed considerably fewer building sites than today but to any visitor it is still exciting. From the five tables on the pavement, the gentle surf was obvious, and soon to be enhanced by a myriad of stars and the moon.

Considerably closer to our table, our waitress (when not, I discovered, working as a professional sculptress) welcomed us and recited that day's menu, which inside the restaurant is listed on a series of small blackboards on the wall around the open kitchen. Cured kingfish; Spanish mackerel, a firm white fish that is no relation to mackerel, with scallops; and mulberry ice cream rivaled a bottle of Two Paddocks 2010 Pinot Noir from New Zealand and were almost a match for the view.

The proximity to the water of the tables on the terrace of **Catalina** in Rose Bay (pictured above) is such that when restaurateur Michael McMahon walked past our table and noticed that only the shells of Sydney rock oysters remained, he swept up the plate and poured the contents into the sea below.

This restaurant takes its name from the famous Catalina flying boats that once made up the airline that flew from the adjacent shore. Seaplanes still take off here and the view of the water and nearby Shark Island is magnificent, but for anybody interested in restaurants, the McMahon family provides a fascinating case study.

Michael's experience has allowed him to assemble an excellent team: chef Mark Axisa; a sushi chef, Yoshinori Fushigami whose prawn hand rolls are exemplary; and in Andrew de Vries an excellent sommelier. These talents are enhanced by the skills of his wife, Judy, and daughter Kate, who combine elegance with authority in the dining room. It is a great show.

Everything is on show at the more prosaically but memorably named **Kitchen by Mike**, where any lack of subtlety is more than made up for by chef Michael McEnearney's enthusiasm.

Having cooked in London for a decade, McEnearney has installed an open kitchen at one end of a 5,000 sq ft building, formerly a soup canning factory but now a Koskela design store. The kitchen surrounds a vast wood-burning oven that feeds on cut-up railway sleepers that impart great flavour to his sourdough bread (as good in my opinion as the highly regarded Iggy's, the locals' favourite); pizzas; and on the day I visited, a delightfully caramelised pear tart.

Kitchen by Mike is still in its infancy and so only has a licence for breakfast and dinner seven days a week. There is no booking and no menu and you join a queue to order the food that is plated in front of you. But that for McEnearney is a

novel aspect of his job. He feels he is now able to go to the markets and cook more spontaneously and, for the very first time, he explained, 'to allow the customer to let their eyes play a part in dictating what they order'.

My eyes had a great time at the recently opened 250-seater **Mr Wong**. It takes its name, apparently, from the local reference to 'Mr Wong from Hong Kong' and belongs to the enterprising Hemmes family, who own several other notable restaurants in the city centre.

On the ground floor a large open kitchen reveals a vast display of ducks; around the stairwell is a glass display of wine bottles stacked vertically on top of one another, a use of so much space that it would bankrupt any European restaurateur; and downstairs is the exposed brickwork and columns that trace this building's history back to when the Tank Stream, a source of fresh water during its era as a penal colony, flowed here.

Dumplings; a salad of poached chicken and jellyfish; mud crab with ginger and shallots and the braised vegetables all brought a smile to my face. As did the name.

Sean's Panaroma 270 Campbell Parade; tel 61 2 9365 4924; www.seanspanorama.com.au (sic - must cause all sorts of confusion)

Catalina Rose Bay; tel 61 2 9371 0555; www.catalanarosebay.com.au

Kitchen by Mike Unit 1 85 Dunning Avenue, Rosebery; tel 2 9045 0910; www.kitchenbymike.com.au

Mr Wong 3 Bridge Lane; tel 61 2 9240 3000; www.merivale.com.au/mrwong