



The wheel turns: Bridgewater Mill's bright new talent

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Where there's a Mill ...

A creative young chef is doing it his way at this iconic eatery, writes **Tony Love**

WHEN it comes to classic Adelaide Hills tourism scenes, few have the repeat impact as the deck at Bridgewater's Mill. The umbrellas out, the huge waterwheel turning slowly on a warm day, tables set with white linen, waiters slomping between contented diners.

Anyone who's been fortunate enough to have experienced "the deck" will

understand its essential joys, gastronomic or otherwise.

On cooler days, the Mill's interior Petaluma room takes up dining duties, while the building's cavernous grainery room with the Petaluma winery's cellar door hosts the Mill's legendary functions. Weddings are a favourite.

The food and wine elements of the venue have, of course, been vital to the memories the place exudes. While the wines of Brian Croser's original

Petaluma stable, followed by many of his team now under the employ of Lion Nathan, have always attracted international recognition, the Mill also has been home to several extraordinary chefs.

Cath Kerry, Libby Tinsley, and Le Tu Thai all put the restaurant in the national spotlight and for many years were rewarded with critical star and hat ratings. But over the past five years or so, the Mill drifted off the radar of those

who made such judgments.

With the departure of Le Tu Thai close to a year ago, there has been all manner of debate over the direction the Mill's new menus might take.

There was lots of chat about dumbing down and bistrotuning the fine dining experience the Mill had become famous for, but after three seasonal menu rotations, the "new" boy chef, Zac



Ronayne, has begun to genuinely stamp his own style, the double linen table clothing is still in place, the trademark attentive table service remains, and the wine list is more accessible than ever.

The Petaluma room remains timeless, its surrounding rockery garden immaculately kept, so in the end all the focus comes down to the cooking.

Zac had in fact worked under Le Tu Thai from 2004-2007 before heading off on a round-Australian odyssey that included kitchen stints in Margaret River and gaining head chef status at Far North Queensland's famed Nu Nu.

His return to the helm is a most fascinating journey, as he reveals a lighter and more modern approach to daytime dining than his former head chef. His menu is an exuberant mix of multicultural influences, with some dishes radiating the umami joys of the Japanese palate while others celebrate the spices of South-East Asia.

And while there's much gazing towards Asia, he also seems well versed in the French, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean pantry.

A poached chicken breast joined by scampi with a laksa-like sauce gets a zing from hidden segments of grapefruit. Malaysia al fresco – excellent.

Another square black plate is cleverly punctuated with half a dozen mushroom elements in subtle textural settings and an almost unseen sticky ginger caramel, which adds just a faint sweet edge to an otherwise forest and earth-driven idea.

These hyper savoury senses might just be driving Zac's cooking at the moment, as a dish of stunningly creamed Woodside goat curd is aided by several plays on beetroot from syrup to baby dice and more.

Not only is this – and most of his other dishes – among the prettiest presentations you can be served anywhere, the flavours are intense, balanced and thoughtfully harmonised.

Even a generous smear of cauliflower puree beside a good piece of barra offers more than simply a design element, the earthy vegetable mash topped with a smart little salad of white anchovy, asparagus and red quinoa.

There's a salty power in this dish that you might not

imagine in usual white fish offerings; the same goes with a duck, daikon and dashi broth combo, with an added gaminess to go on with.

Hiccups occur occasionally of course. Rounds of "faro polenta" that sit between unbelievably melty pork belly offer nothing to the dish, bland and drying against too spare a serve of beautiful muscatel sauce. Fortunately, cut red grapes add an acidic lift rather than simply sweet fruit beside the belly pieces.

And this prompts some analysis. There may be something deeper going on here about Zac's treatment of sweeter ingredients as well as saucing and accompaniments across his savoury courses – one wonders if the chef has twigged to the increasing sweetness of high-end cooking, and has steered purposefully away. Or he may simply lack a sweet tooth. Whichever answer is good enough, given the proof on the plate.

However, dessert offerings seem almost like they're here under sufferance. While the entrée and main dishes are contemporary and steered with youthful deliberation, a chocolate fondant with raspberry sorbet is perfectly crafted but strangely old-fashioned.

An apple tart is actually a friand-like cake with a tasteless tuft of white foam, some dull botrytis jelly cubes but terrific cinnamon apple ice cream.

Both dishes seem mismatched to the style of the previous courses.

The savoury courses are where it's all going well at the moment. The Mill also has moved to seven lunches a week, and its quietly creative young chef has stepped out on his own path that hopefully will mark its return to our top dining destinations.



Iconic: The understated elegance at Bridgewater Mill.



So pretty: The harmony of flavours in Woodside goat curd with beetroot. Pictures: Brooke Whatnall