

fields of GOLD

REVERED CHEF ANDREW MCCONNELL STRIKES A BEAUTIFUL BALANCE BETWEEN CASUAL DINING AND HAUTE CUISINE AT HIS LATEST DIGS, GOLDEN FIELDS.



Steamed eggplant, silken tofu and pickled chillies

There's been a myriad of walk-in restaurants opening up around Australia over the past few years, where bookings are banned and punters are welcomed on a first-come-first-served basis. And whilst being unable to secure a seat at the dining house du jour can be frustrating, it's testament to the fact that foodies are prepared to wait in line for well-cooked eats. Golden Fields is one such restaurant, and the lack of a reservation option seems to have done nothing but heighten the buzz surrounding Andrew McConnell's newest venture.

Famous for his other successful Melbourne haunts, Cumulus Inc. and Cutler & Co., it seems McConnell can do no wrong, irrespective of the cuisine he turns his hand to. For unlike the decidedly modern European menu at Cumulus, or Cutler's contemporary fare, Golden Fields' share plates bring a taste of the orient to its bustling St Kilda address. The real surprise however is that McConnell didn't do it sooner given the years he spent cheffing in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

Like so many of Melbourne's finest establishments, Golden Fields is quite unassuming from the exterior. Clean windows and a yellow awning provide a modest façade, with the restaurant name politely etched on a glass pane. Blink and you may well miss it. This quiet approach continues once inside, from the interior fit-out right through to the honest dishes on offer.

The menu is divided into several subheads – Raw, To Start, Salads and Vegetables, Meat and Fish, and Dessert – with a few nibbles leading the way. The delicious house-made kimchi (hailing from Korea) seemed a natural starting point and prepared us well for the Far East flavours that followed.

It's a very good sign indeed when you're left raving about the salads and vegetables a restaurant is dishing up. The marinated cauliflower possessed a beautiful balance of texture and flavours, the crunchy florets perfectly transporting the sweetness of the fish sauce and its coriander counterpart. Similarly, the sautéed mushrooms were packed full of meaty flavour, further enhanced by the oozing yolk of the poached duck egg that sat atop.





BOX BRIEF

WHERE ■ 157 Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, VIC

CHEF ■ Andrew McConnell

CROWD ■ Local hipsters, food lovers and Andrew McConnell devotees

TASTE ■ Modern Asian

HOURS ■ Tuesday to Sunday, noon until midnight, and breakfast Friday through Sunday from 8am until 11.30am

WORTH IT ■ The sheer freshness of produce and perfectly balanced flavours are like a private party for your palate

NOT SURE ABOUT ■ Due to the pared-back aesthetic, Golden Fields can get a little on the loud side, especially come Friday night. But for those who enjoy a lively atmosphere, this will only add to the experience

Black sesame // lime and yoghurt

However, the absolute standout dish resided under the 'Raw' header on Fields' extensive menu. Fleishy king salmon pieces, served in a sauce of Chinese mustard, pickled shallots, ginger and cucumber, reiterated why, when executed well, Asian fusion tickles the palate like few other cuisines. Unbelievably fresh, with the right combination of acidity, sweetness and punch, I cleared the entire plate in a matter of minutes.

Although I cannot profess to be a dessert lover (a good cheese board always wins my vote), Fields really ups the ante on green tea ice cream, what with the addition of pumpkin and liquorice flavours. Similarly, the peanut butter parfait with salted caramel and soft chocolate could only be described as a Snickers bar on smack – addictive and moreish, with that unforgettable blend of salt and sweetness.

Staying true to its Asian influence, the drinks menu opens with four suitably spiced and spiced cocktails, along with eight handpicked sakés – four of which are available by the glass measure deemed fit. Australian and French varietals dominate a beautifully balanced wine list, with a few New Zealand and Spanish drops thrown in for good measure. The 2008 Denis Pommier Chablis was beautifully rounded and testament to why we've been witnessing a 'Chardonnay and friends' revival in recent years.

Besides from the casual 'walk-in and wait' set-up, another hot dining trend Golden Fields champions is the minimalist aesthetic – though not in a shiny shiny, stainless steel sort of way. A stunning marble bar spans the length of the venue and wooden chairs and tables are grouped on the concrete flooring to create a mess hall feel that would make Margiela proud. Designer lamps jut out in a topsy-turvy *Alice In Wonderland* kind of way, and perfectly complement the pared-back artworks that also adorn the walls.

It's the kind of space that welcomes all, no matter their business. A glass of Riesling and some marinated cucumber to wind down the working week, a bonafide feast with a gaggle of good friends, or a lazy Sunday breakfast, Golden Fields possesses a quintessentially European attitude to food. Eat a little, eat a lot, but just make sure you take the time to taste life.