

RESTAURANTS

Rustic elegance to warm to

The Long
Table
Red Hill

Charming and rustic,
with a devotion to
local produce **14/20**

Where: The Long Table,
159 Shoreham Road, Red Hill,
phone 5989 2326
Food: contemporary, honest
Cost: small dish \$16, main \$32
Wine list: Peninsula-focused
Corkage: Sundays only, \$5 a bottle
We drank: 2006 Scorpo Pinot Gris
Service: charming, efficient
Value: good
Owners: Andrew Doughton and
Samantha Fitzgerald
Chef: Andrew Doughton
Vegetarian: one entree, one main
Outdoors: Yes
Wheelchairs: Yes
Parking: Street
Cards: MC V and eftpos
Web: www.thelongtable.com.au
Hours: Wed-Sun 6pm-11pm
(extended hours during summer)

Score: 1-9: Unacceptable. **10-11:** Just OK,
some shortcomings. **12:** Fair. **13:** Getting
there. **14:** Recommended. **15:** Good.
16: Really good. **17:** Truly excellent.
18: Outstanding. **19-20:** Approaching



WHAT'S not to like about a winding drive through one of the most beautiful parts of Melbourne's outskirts on a wintry night and arriving at a charming, bucolic venue with a couple of heartily blazing fireplaces?

Well, the shock of cold, hard wooden chairs at the first point of contact. But that is a minor quibble — some seats are padded with red velvet — at this quaintly elegant shopfront restaurant.

Attention to detail is noteworthy at The Long Table. Determinedly provincial decor includes slate floors, rustic timber tables, whimsical food-themed art work, wrought-iron mirrors and wall decorations. And it's all smartly accessorised with black-clad wait staff in autumnal-print aprons.

The beautifully bound wine list builds on the theme, with a short, informal blurb about the owners plus a selection of very good local wines as well as many considered Australian and overseas choices.

A wine-by-the-glass selection, which consists mostly of regional wines, suits our purposes. It's a cold night and a long drive home.

Perhaps a little more wine knowledge could have been displayed, or offered, but it may have existed among the staff if we had requested it.

The Long Table is a four-year-old family restaurant with an appealing focus on the regional foods of the Mornington Peninsula.

Husband-and-wife owners

Leanne Tolra

Andrew Doughton and Samantha Fitzgerald say in their blurb that they love their "beautiful little restaurant off the beaten track" and "relish the change of seasons on the Peninsula as an opportunity to explore new food and wine matches".

Fitzgerald works on the restaurant floor, while Doughton is head chef.

Respect and admiration for the produce emanates from his kitchen. It's evident in the sizeable basket of Baker Boys ciabatta bread and the olive oil from Leontyna in nearby Paringa Road.

But from the first mouthful of food, we're captivated by its quality and finesse.

Jerusalem artichoke souffle, with apple puree, frisee lettuce and candied walnut vinaigrette (\$16) is rich but delicate, the mousse-like texture and cheesy notes are elegant partners for the slightly tart sauce and the beetroot essence that garnishes the plate. The crunch of the scattered curls of frisee and the crisp, just-sweet walnuts add depth and interest. The artichokes are from local growers in Boneo and the frisee is from Tyabb.

The dish partners well with the pear, nut and spice tones of the locally produced Scorpio 2006

Pinot Gris (\$9.50/glass).

A confit pork belly, with Cumberland sauce, panfried scallops and aromatic herb salad (\$17) is made with local herbs and meat from nearby Red Hill Butcher.

The pork belly is tender but well-textured, with a crisp crackling, and sits atop the sauce, a classic English cold-meat accompaniment of cranberry and orange. The three premium scallops, trimmed of roe, were lightly seared and the herb salad acted as a refreshing foil for the stronger flavours.

The room — and the seats of our chairs — are heating up, the tables are filling and the fireplaces are radiating comforting warmth. The crowd is mixed: there's a hen's night, adult families and younger couples. Tonight, the balance is tipped to the under-30s side, which is probably unusual.

We each ordered only a single glass of wine with our entrees, and a second wasn't offered with, or



Pan-roasted veal cutlet.

PICTURES: GARY MEDLICOTT

before, the mains. Offering wines by the glass is labour-intensive and many places struggle to get it right but it is worth the extra effort, particularly for a restaurant promoting local wines. We selected a glass each of the 2004 Chapel Hill Sangiovese Cabernet (\$8 a glass).

We've chosen, with a pleasant degree of indecision, from the short but interesting menu an oven-roasted eye fillet, potato and wild mushroom crepe, glazed root vegetables and port wine jus (\$32) and a pan-roasted veal cutlet, rabbit and globe artichoke gnocchi, spinach cream and madeira jus (\$32).

The perfectly cooked eye fillet is a thick medallion of obviously good texture and quality, the "crepe", more of a fritter and the root vegetables, from the same Boneo grower, nicely caramelised. It's well balanced and rounded out nicely by the rich jus.

The veal is terrific, a cutlet and another generous section of reverently treated meat, married with the earthy, wintry flavours of the rich rabbit and artichoke sauce. The small pieces of lightly fried gnocchi, the verdant spinach cream and the madeira jus each added texture, depth and interest. It was a good partner for the sangiovese.

A side dish of cauliflower and cheddar gratin was ideal winter comfort food.

Fitzgerald says it is more difficult to obtain local produce in winter but locals knocking on the back door often provide unexpected bounty,

perhaps quail eggs or produce from a family garden. In spring, summer and autumn things get easier. St Neots farm in Red Hill offers access to its orchards and Doughton wanders through and picks his own fruit, heirloom tomatoes or radicchio. He also has access to Red Hill Kitchen's gardens, and morello cherries and quinces from Ellisfield Farm.

It was undoubtedly the sort of mid-year night when dessert is essential fare; those extra calories help combat nature's chill.

The Callebaut chocolate tart with passionfruit ice-cream and crusted pistachio crumble (\$13) got my companion's nod of approval. It's been on the restaurant's menu since it opened. The passionfruit are from Doughton's parents' Red Hill backyard. The sliver of tart I was permitted to taste was smooth and rich, the ice-cream nicely tart and the crumble crisp and sweet. But I'd need my own serve to confirm that.

The pear tart tartin with house-made Pedro Ximenez sherry ice-cream and hazelnut caramel (\$13), was a fine dessert; a fabulous combination of simple flavours. But the tart was served too hot and the sherry ice-cream melted rapidly and lost its impact. A shame, the idea was classy.

There's not really much more you could ask of a semi-rural, produce-driven restaurant — other than cushions on the seats in winter.

John Lethlean is on leave.