

What happens to a restaurant after it hits the reality TV jackpot? Does ego take over from hospitality; does confidence in the product mean that effort slackens; should diners feel lucky to get a seat? And, on the flipside, does the publicity draw a crowd of gawkers who don't quite get the dining experience?

Bird's Nest Restaurant – West End's darling yakitori bar – won Channel 9's *The Hotplate* in early September, with best friends and owners Emi Kamada and Marie Yokoyama taking home \$100,000 for their trouble. I don't do reality TV so I missed the moment, but I was rather thrilled with the result: after all Bird's Nest is a place that entertains as well as feeds, and it pushes the boundaries a little with all sorts of offal oddities – arteries, livers, skin, hearts, bums, cartilage – rather brazenly dotted through the menu, like nudists on a public beach ... nothing odd here people, nothing odd at all.

So I revisited, looking for holes in the product and vanity in the service. But things seem entirely intact. The chirpy enthusiasm of the waitstaff remains, the bustle and chatter from the chefs is still a big part of the attraction, and the welcome seems entirely genuine.

The food is fun. Lunch is focused around bento boxes while the nights are yakitori-centric. But you can cross the boundaries. Whatever the meal, it begins with a bowl of rather delicious miso.

The star of the bento boxes is the version with soft shell crab (\$25). Like the others, it comes with steamed rice, a crunchy salad, deep-fried wafers of pastry dressed with sesame and a side dish ... this time chicken karaage (cold – was it meant to be?). It's all good, but the bullseye is the jumble of perfectly fried, crunchy and squishy, salty, sweet, succulent soft-shell crab. Worth \$25? Easy!

The dinner menu has a heap of alternatives – Japanese omelette, karaage, tofu, chicken wings, pat – but its core is the 22 skewers grilled over coal (inset). Central to that core is the offal. I love the stuff, always have. But, thanks to yummy marinades and smoky wafts of charcoal, Bird's Nest has made it cool, mainstream even.

In fact, I'd happily sit at the bar and eat nothing but the offal ... it's sublime; hearts and livers (\$4 each) perfectly underdone, arteries (\$4) just chewy. And if the thought of offal offends there are chicken, pork belly, tenderloin and vegetarian options.

There are three desserts, loads of shochu, choya and a thrilling run of sak , a list of all-Japanese beers and a bunch of suitable wines. Has Bird's Nest changed? Not that I can see, and if it has it is only for the better.



with TONY HARPER

PHOTOGRAPHS: Richard Waugh

BIRD'S NEST RESTAURANT
 220 Melbourne St, South Brisbane. Ph: 3844 4306. Owners: Emi Kamada and Marie Yokoyama. Chef: Daiki Wakabayashi. Lunch, Wed-Sun; dinner, daily. Licensed. V & G-F options. Credit cards & Eftpos. Wheelchair access. On-street parking.
FOOD - 8 WINE - 7 SERVICE - 8 AMBIENCE - 8
RATINGS 10: perfect; 9: excellent; 8: great; 7: good; 6: passable; 5: disappointing; 1-4: awful

Winning ways

Fun food puts a feather in the cap of reality TV favourite

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