

Fremantle's Seaview Hotel is offering something different to its competitors across all three of its menus.

Bistro Chic

Pub grub has well and truly evolved, with many venues now offering food at the highest level. **Amelia Ball** chats with two head chefs about how they're fine-tuning their **GOURMET** offer.

It's fast becoming difficult to remember that food was once secondary for many publicans. Until recently, a large amount of pub hotels offered a simple, short menu, with most 'dishes' served straight from the deep fryer. There's no doubt the humble fryer still plays a key role in most bistro operations, but an undeniable shift has occurred. The introduction of non-smoking legislation has cleared the air for a new breed of pub-goers who are happy to dine in - and with their families too. And in a bid to work with the ongoing changes to operations, clientele and, trends, publicans have gotten smart about their food.

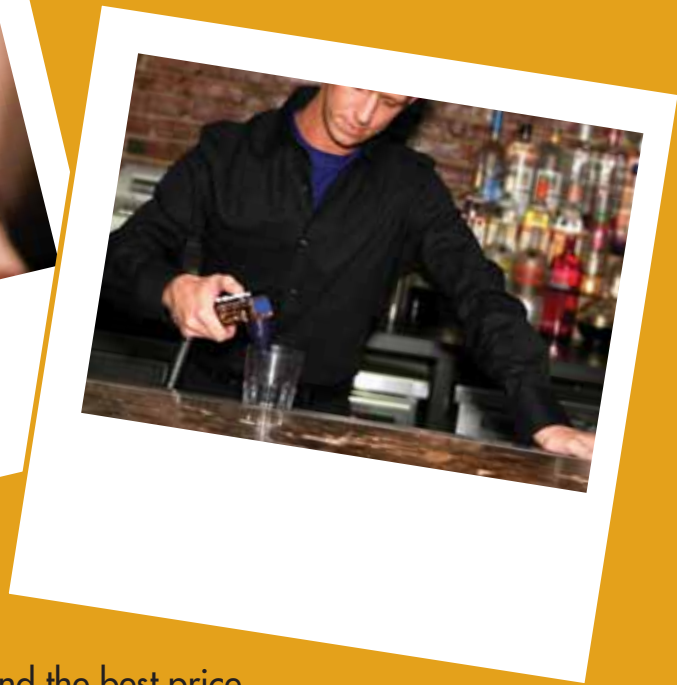
The **3 Weeds** in Sydney and the **Seaview Hotel** in Fremantle might be on opposite sides of the country, but the two venues are proving what can be done with the right kitchen teams and philosophies. Leigh McDivitt from the 3 Weeds has wasted no time in putting his stamp on the venue since moving into the role of head chef last month. The pub has previously held a coveted Chef's Hat but McDivitt said the food was "very fancy" at the time. While it is still very much a cut above - and that enviable hat is still the end goal - McDivitt has been busy implementing a range of changes to further suit their regular clientele.

The changes have included revamping the **bar menu**, which is offered in addition to the separate restaurant dishes. A menu for the bar's patrons was previously offered but McDivitt called his new version "more friendly",



Just one of the dishes on the innovative menu at Sydney's 3 Weeds Hotel.

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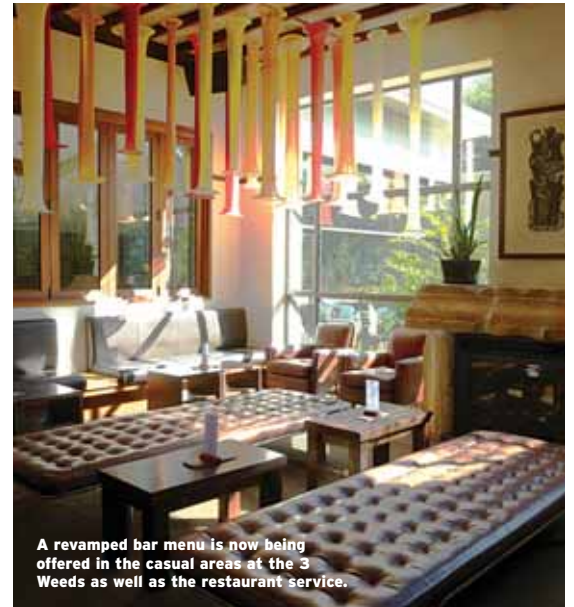
including tapas, a burger - a first for the venue - and even a roasted half-chook. This one is marinated for 24 hours in lemon, wine, fennel seeds and thyme, and also comes with chips (\$17). All bistro meals, which will include heartier options like shanks for the winter,

shaken things up. "It's fairly modern food and with a lot of emphasis on our specials," he said. "At the moment, it's all about the fresh fish. We have a gold band snapper with a light caper butter sauce with steamed veggies, which we've got at \$35. We're also

he had been hearing for a long time from the regulars at the pub how they wanted items like burgers or lasagna and a roast. "So, I've listened to them," he said. "After all, they're the ones paying the wages. You've got to speak to your customers and regulars."



Leigh McDivitt became head chef at the 3 Weeds last month, previously sous chef at the Sydney venue.



A revamped bar menu is now being offered in the casual areas at the 3 Weeds as well as the restaurant service.

"You've got to speak to your customers and regulars [about what they want]. After all, they're the ones paying the wages." - Leigh McDivitt, the 3 Weeds, Sydney.

will be kept at \$18 and under, and McDivitt describes the food as rustic bistro pub food. "It's the type of food you eat with friends and don't have to worry about how much money you're going to spend," he said. Meanwhile, McDivitt describes the restaurant as taking that next step up. "It's bit more special and classy, without being too classy," he said.

For Fremantle's Seaview Hotel, it's a case of reinforcing its **points of difference** against the heavy competition in the area, with head chef Ryan Duke saying there are about 10 to 12 pubs in the six-block radius. "We take a different approach with our Italian influence," Duke said. It also helps that the pub is part-owned by two of the Fremantle Dockers - Matt Pavlich and Paul Hasleby. The AFL focus gives the pub an added advantage, bringing many fans in for a drink to watch the big games - and to also meet the boys.

The venue has undergone a huge **renovation** to include a whole new bar area, restaurant and wine room, along with its new look. Duke has come on board since the venue reopened and he is now more than a year into his tenure in the kitchen, having

doing a beautiful parsley and parmesan-crusted snapper with an avocado salsa and fresh garden salad for about \$26. And we do a lot of steak dishes - everyone's always chasing the big sirloin and scotch fillet."

Like The Seaview, it's a **busy operation** at the 3 Weeds, with seating for 70 in the restaurant, plus four large spaces throughout the bar area in which people can dine. Two teams currently operate out of two different kitchens to create the two lots of dishes, but that's all about to change, with the one combined kitchen set to be created. "We've been given the go-ahead for the job," McDivitt said. "They now want us to work Sundays and so we can do that, we'll have to integrate it so people can work both sides," he said. The one big kitchen space will see the two lots of chefs learn from one another so further rotation across the teams can take place.

With an impressive background, McDivitt cut his teeth across a number of Merivale kitchens, including Est. and Bistro CBD, among other venues like Sydney's Pello. But training is only one part of the process - it's about **talking to the punters**. McDivitt said

Duke's philosophy at The Seaview very much echoes McDivitt's approach. "I lean towards food that people want," he said. "I believe you have to give people the food you want, especially in tough times." It means there's a wide range of options at The Seaview, with the 90-seater a la carte in addition to the menu offered in the wine room, which offers a deal of four items from a choice of about 14 for the price of \$12.50. They make a lot of these finger foods themselves, including the dips and croutons. Meanwhile, the Seaview also has a bar menu, which includes steak sandwiches, bangers and mash, and other traditional pub favourites. They will also serve up these dishes to those who choose to eat in the restaurant space too.

Duke is well aware of the **changes** that have occurred in the pub scene. "People are starting to realise they can come down to a pub and get a really good meal," he said. This head chef and his small team are therefore focused on offering dishes with a twist. "One of the biggest movers is our red seafood curry, which is something not many people are doing," he said. "We also make our own gnocchi and sauce, and we also sell a lot of our sea scallop and sausage salad." This one creates the uncommon combination of seared scallops with grilled chorizo, with a lemon dressing.

Pricing is a key issue in the current climate for every venue, and the 3 Weeds is working hard to remain accessible. “It’s been quiet over the past couple of months but it takes turns between the bar and restaurant as to what’s busier and hopefully now with all the changes, we’ll keep the following for the two.” Entrees in the restaurant remain at around \$18 and the mains will max out at about \$36. “I don’t want to go too crazy,” he said. One way they get around their costing challenges is by spending more on quality meat, for example, but serving it with something a little more simple. As McDivitt said, if you do it well, they’ll come back for more. “With our simple serve of beans with butter and shaved almonds, they almost lick the bowl,” he said. And by keeping the bar menu fairly flexible, they can work in any leftover produce for dishes like soups or dips, among others.

Keeping **creative and consistent** comes naturally for Duke, who has served up a range of styles in various kitchens around the Western state for almost ten years. He did his apprenticeship in a five-star boutique restaurant and has since worked in resort kitchens as well as off-shore for Paspaley pearl farmers in Broome. With just four chefs on the roster and one kitchen hand, it’s a small team but this also helps with that all-important consistency.

Such a small team also allows Duke to ensure almost zero **wastage** and tight ordering to assist in costs. “We order quite regularly and don’t have things hanging around,” Duke said. Being in Fremantle, they have the pick of the bunch when it comes to seafood but they tend to stick with Larner’s.

MENU SNAPSHOT

The Seaview Hotel, Fremantle:

-Oregano and Lemon Marinated Lamb Cutlets, with garlic, fetta and chive risotto, and rocket salad - \$33.

The 3 Weeds, Sydney:

-Salt Roasted Spatchcock, with caramelised witlof, shimiji mushrooms and tarragon jus gras - \$32

“I’ve been cooking around Perth here for a while so I know a lot of suppliers,” Duke said. “You’ve got to keep on their good side because if you owe them money or they don’t like you, then you’ll be paying top price for everything.”

Not surprisingly, it’s the quality and consistency of **fresh produce** that also plays a significant role in the success of the 3 Weeds. It keeps McDivitt on his toes when dealing with suppliers, including preferred companies like De Costi’s. “I spoke to them the other day and told them I want something different that doesn’t cost an arm and a leg, and they came through,” he said. Keeping an eye on costs and wastage is all part of the process, with hands-on McDivitt able to ensure the team is doing as they should. “Some chefs like to do more paperwork and less cooking but I find you lose your creativity pretty fast. I feel guilty when I have a night off and with up to 12 chefs in the kitchen on a busy night, it can go pear-shaped quite fast if you’re not there,” he said.

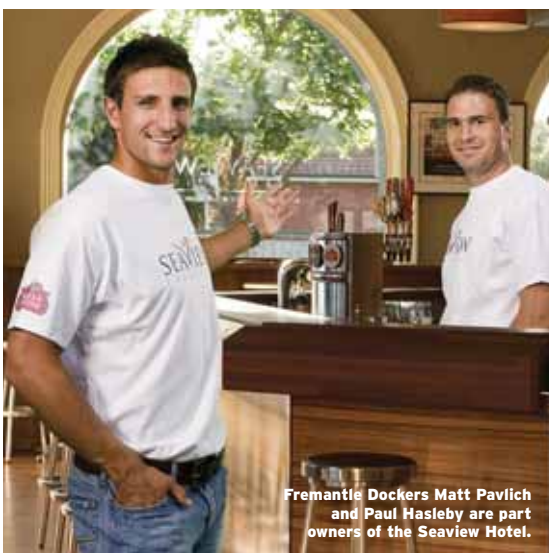
Equally as excited about the jobs ahead of them, this pair of chefs is committed

to constantly working at improving their businesses. Having mixed up the menus at the Seaview since he came on board, Duke is continuing to enjoy the process and seeing the diners return. “You’ve just got to keep working at it and try to build your reputation,” he said. “Even if people only come to your restaurant once or twice, there’s nothing worse than getting a different dish to your last visit... Having a good relationship with the people you work with also makes the job easier.”

And with McDivitt at the start of his **next phase** at the 3 Weeds, he is enjoying getting things started. “On the bar side, we’re just giving the punters what they want so we can keep them happy. And with the restaurant, we’re taking it to the next level. We want to get a hat but not make it too special so people can still afford to go there,” he said. “It’s about doing what you do and doing it good. Maintain fresh produce and consistency, and make it perfect. And if it’s not good, don’t serve it. I always ask my chefs if they would pay for the dish. If not, don’t serve it.” ■

“I lean towards food that people want... I believe you have to give people the food you want, especially in tough times.”

– Ryan Duke, The Seaview Hotel, Fremantle.



Fremantle Dockers Matt Pavlich and Paul Hasleby are part owners of the Seaview Hotel.



Keeping it fresh, consistent and different to its neighbours is the key to the Seaview’s approach.