

# eat out

## Larissa Dubecki



# 13/20

## Gypsy and Pig

**Food** Japanese

**Where** Shop 3, 391 Little Lonsdale Street, city

**Phone** 9640 0731

**Cost** Typical starter, \$8.50; main, \$20; dessert, \$8

**Licensed**

**Wine list** There's sake, shochu and a short Australian wine selection

**We drank** Petaluma riesling (Clare Valley, South Australia), \$10/\$50

**Owner and chef** Ken Higuchi

**Vegetarian** Not much for you here

**Dietary** GF available

**Service** Sweet

**Value** Good

**Noise** Unobtrusive

**Wheelchairs** No

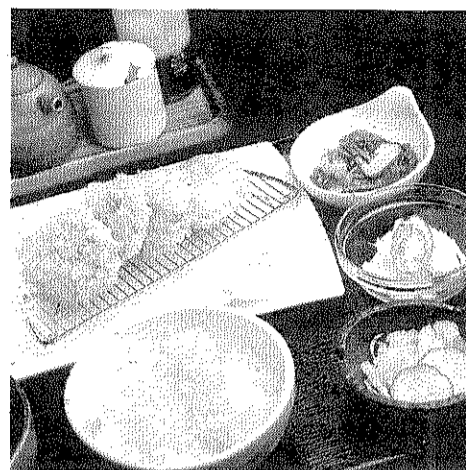
**Outdoors** Yes

**Bookings** Yes

**Web** n/a

**Cards** AMEX MC V

**Hours** Mon-Fri, 11.30am-2.30pm; Tues-Sat, 5.30-10pm



Photos: Eddie Jim

### The low-down

**The best bit** Pigging out

**The worst bit** Seating – it's a bit of a squish

**Go-to dish** Deep-fried crumbed kurobuta eye fillet, \$22

evening, Gypsy and Pig's piggy chauvinism can be considered a win.

There's a Scotch egg of perfect yolk-runniness, spliced in half to reveal the concentric circles of pork mince and golden crumb, all squiggled in mayo-miso creaminess. Japan's answer to the turducken encases a flavour-packed pork gyoza in salty-crisp chicken skin. To tire of such simple pleasures is to tire of life.

And thence to the tonkatsu: deep-fried kurobuta loin. Well, actually to the hirekatsu, made with kurobuta eye fillet – a few dollars more expensive but, at \$22, still decent value, worth boosting by adding the \$7 teishoku (set) of miso soup, with a thrillingly smoky bonito taste that's a cut above the norm and three small sides.

The meat in its shaggy coating of rough panko breadcrumbs has a buttery texture and rich flavour that can easily handle the might of the fruity tonkatsu sauce ladled over it at the table. The wafu dressing – a citrusy onion-soy vinaigrette – does good things to the accompanying pile of cabbage, meticulously

shredded like the last act of an ousted politician. This is indeed a meal.

There are kurobuta hot pots, and fine slices of kurobuta in ginger soy, and kurobuta braised Chinese-style with cucumber. My pick is the squishy cubes of sweet soy-braised belly with a soft-boiled, tea-soaked egg and greens.

Shochu cocktails and sake are popular with the mostly Japanese diners. The short Australian wine sticks to respected names: we chose a Petaluma "riesling" over the Shaw & Smith "savinlon blanc".

Take heart if your spirits sink at the mention of green tea ice-cream. Normally such an anaemic bit of meal-ending blah, this is a creamy, bright thing bursting with matcha flavour. Similar kudos to the toasty nuttiness of the black sesame ice-cream.

It's a humble place, but Gypsy and Pig is unquestionably one of those eateries that make Melbourne's food scene such a scene. The value is unquestionable, the food robust, the novelty value high. If this is a cult, then I'm a believer.

**Twitter:** @LarissaDubecki

# This little piggy knows its market

**A** restaurant with a cult following? I bet it's Japanese. Japanese restaurants inspire single-minded devotion in a way only bijou, esoteric eateries devoted to the obsessive pursuit of a rarefied aim can. A nation of culinary monomaniacs, any place rolling sashimi, sushi, noodle dishes and tempura into the one menu is considered the lesser for it. They've made a specialty of specialising.

Hence Gypsy and Pig, a tonkatsu (fried pork) restaurant celebrating the prized, pale pork known as kurobuta. The flesh of the heritage breed black Berkshire pig is the wagyu, the toro, the salted caramel of pork. There are plenty of tonkatsu specialists in Japan; this is the first I know of in Melbourne. With its double down on kurobuta, it has been generating a fair amount of cultish devotion.

You'll find this little corner spot with no obvious signage tucked down one end of Hardware Lane, which is becoming more like Lygon Street each day with its ambling tourists and aggressive spruikers. Ignore them. Look for a pig above a door. Step inside and you could be in Osaka. Behind the kitchen

counter, the chef and one assistant. On the floor, two waitresses with left-of-centre English skills and a sweet attitude. Just 24 seats all up, humans outnumbered by the pigs that decorate every available surface and pander to the Japanese obsession with kawaii (cuteness). It feels completely authentic, right down to the spelling mistakes on the menu.

Gypsy and Pig is not aiming for the aesthetic clarity of, say, Tempura Hajime. Anyone familiar with owner-chef Ken Higuchi's former restaurant Horoki will recognise his culinary ramblings such as tuna carpaccio, resurrected here on a piece of long white pottery with thin slices of sashimi tuna covered in crunchy slivers of daikon and a blizzard of parmesan. Yes, parmesan, which partly melts into the citrus ponzu soy dressing, making a creamy acid-spiked sludge. Don't sneer – it's delicious. So is the potato gratin, an earthenware dish of potato cubes, broccoli and shreds of pancetta bubbling away in a salty-cheesy lava stained pink by cod roe. Yes, cod roe.

But that's it for the non-pork dishes, at least for us. Submit to the kurobuta. In a town that consumes its own weight in pork belly every

### How we score

Of 20 points, 10 are awarded for food, five for service, three for ambience, two for wow factor.

12 Reasonable 13 Solid and satisfactory 14 Good 15 Very good 16 Seriously good

17 Great 18 Excellent 19 Outstanding 20 The best of the best

Restaurants are reviewed again for *The Age Good Food Guide* and scores may vary.

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