

Victory's hat-trick

A casual pub has finally teamed its magnificent views and excellent cellar with a menu to match.

THE Victory Hotel at Sellicks Hill has long been famous for its fish and chips and its wine cellar. Those who know it well have come to accept – or forget – its many incongruities. For the Victory is both ordinary and extraordinary. Housed in unremarkable, low-slung buildings fronting a car park scraped out of the hill, it nonetheless commands one of the best views in the district, from the coastal strip, across the Willunga Basin and out to the gulf.

On a still summer night, there are few more pleasant places to be than in the Victory beer garden at dusk. To enjoy the view as you eat, however, you need to score one of the three tables at the front of the restaurant, or dine outdoors on the patio. The alfresco option is markedly more attractive since the installation, about three months ago, of PVC blinds and patio heaters.

The patio upgrade is the first visible sign, on arrival, of the new broom that has swept through the Victory in the past six months or so.

Word of the changes reached us via local sources, and there was the news that executive chef Karena Dunn had won Fleurieu Peninsula Foods Best Chef award in the October regional Fiesta.

Until now, the cellar, rather than the food, earned the Victory its reputation.

Proprietor Doug Goven is a passionate collector, and his cellar is testament to his knowledge and commitment. But there's little to suggest, when you arrive in the hotel dining room, with the sight, sounds and smells of the front bar wafting through, that such treasures reside below stairs.

Then you spot the activity in the bar area that serves the restaurant. Wines are being decanted and served in beautiful glasses. Glance at the wine list and the story of Doug's passion unfolds.

It is this that has drawn us to the Victory several times in recent years. We have delighted in the wines and the warm, casual ambience of the pub. The Victory throbs with activity, especially on weekends, and the kitchen consistently turns out up to 150 meals a night in reasonably good time.

Ultimately, however, the food has failed to shine. The wines were definitely the star performers.

So, it was with some anticipation that we arrived for our first meal with Karena as executive chef.

With a pedigree including time at the ultra-glamorous Icebergs in Bondi, Billy Kwong (home of Kylie Kwong) in Surry Hills and Melbourne's Wine Room, Karena had lots to offer to the Victory when she arrived a little over a year ago. Her influence has gradually been brought to bear and, since assuming the role of executive chef earlier this year, she has made significant changes.

The signature fish and chips might best reflect those changes, we thought. So, we ordered Coopers beer-battered flathead from the specials (whiting is a fixture on the menu). To start, we had barbecued gulf prawns, and the Victory original salt



The bill

Entrees: \$7 to \$12.50
Mains: \$10.90 to \$24.50
Desserts: \$7.50

Vegetarian options: A few

Wheelchair access: Yes

Wine list: Outstanding

Corkage: \$7.50 bottle

Summary: With Karena Dunn in charge, working alongside head chef Todd Steele, the Victory kitchen is turning out high-quality fare that at last is a match for Doug Goven's fabulous cellar.

Score: 15

Ratings – Below 10: Don't bother. 11: Barely passable. 12: Some interest. 13: Shows promise. 14: Good. 15: Recommended. 16: Really good. 17: Excellent. 18: Exceptional. Above 18: Fabulous dining experience. All restaurants are visited unannounced and meals paid for by *The Advertiser*.

and pepper squid. The prawns, served with a delicious garlicky aioli and peppery, perky wild rocket, were succulent and sweet and left you wanting more. The squid looked less promising but proved worthy of the menu's boast. What it lacked in crunch it made up for in tenderness and flavour. A Wither Hills 2005 sauvignon blanc from New Zealand (\$7 a glass) was just right with the seafood.

From the cellar, we chose a 2002 Tomboy Hill Pinot Noir, from Bendigo and unknown to us, but

we were encouraged by James Halliday's 94/100 rating, and a quote from British wine writer Jancis Robinson. (Odd bits of information posted on the shelves are among the charms of Doug's cellar.)

Jancis advises: "If you come across a name that's completely unfamiliar to you on a wine list or on a shelf, it's almost certainly worth trying. It's probably there because someone passionately believes in it." Good advice and the pinot was nice.

Our fish and chips were excellent – batter light and crisp, flathead moist, good chips. Hooray! A signature dish worthy of the name, and the wines.

The only flat spot in the meal was the duck, served with shiitake mushroom dumpling and Chinese broccoli. Had we not first had the squid, the Chinese spices in the duck (Szechuan salt, star anise and cinnamon, I later discovered) might have been welcome, but they seemed too similar. And the dumpling needs work – too stodgy for my taste.

The inevitable panna cotta and a rich chocolate hazelnut meringue gateau were of a high standard. It was a truly satisfying meal. Summer at the Victory is going to be huge.

□ Karena's skills, and Doug's wines, will be on show in a special dinner on Friday night, starting with NV Billecart-Salmon on the lawn. Five courses, with wines, for \$100 a head. And if the Billecart-Salmon appeals, you can buy it by the glass at the Victory this summer for \$12.

Victory Hotel

Main South Rd
Sellicks Beach
Ph 8556 3083

www.victoryhotel.com.au

Lunch: Midday-2.30pm,
7 days

Dinner: 6pm-9pm

Seating: 60 inside,
60 outside

Executive chef:
Karena Dunn

Head chef:
Todd Steele

Proprietor:
Doug Goven

Right, Victory chefs
Karena and Todd.

Photos: GRANT NOWELL



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