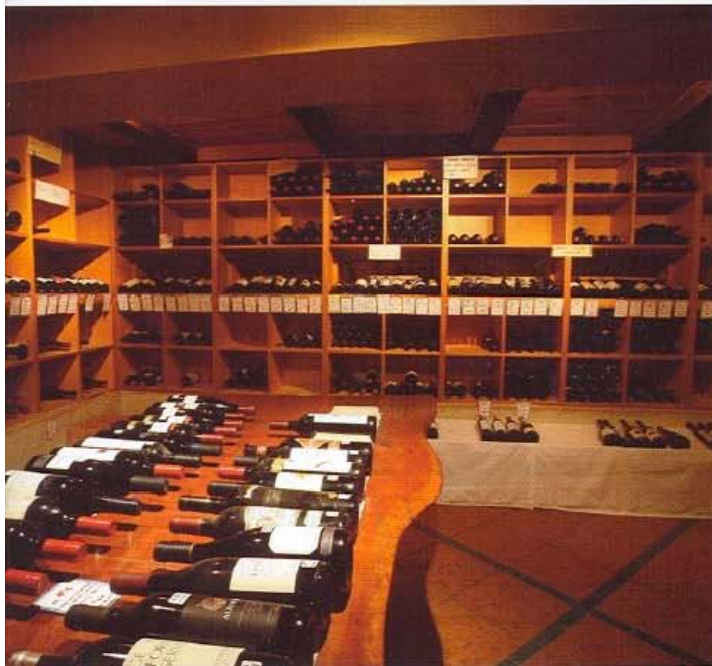


Victory Hotel

MAIN SOUTH RD, SELICKS BEACH



THE VIEW OVER GULF ST VINCENT IS SENSATIONAL, the wine list superb, and the food is a model of smart regional cuisine presented at its freshest and most delicious. It's little wonder that customers often declare that the Victory Hotel, perched atop Sellicks Hill, has one of the best restaurants along the Fleurieu Peninsula. But this title doesn't sit comfortably with proprietor Doug Govan. He insists that the Victory is simply a pub, boasting all the attributes that any good watering hole should provide to patrons – good drink and good food at fair prices, in a comfortable setting worth settling into for a good long while. If this combination is deemed beyond the ordinary, Doug argues that this is more a reflection that other hotels slip well below the mark, rather than the Victory trying to rise above its station.

Built in 1858, the Victory remains a hotel constructed around its front bar. Architecturally, it's a collision of two low-slung rooms built from bluestone with lots of added-on bits; verandahs and alcoves, a few gracious stone walls surrounding a lush lawn and a big, shady tree. Doug has been fiddling with the building for 15 years and it's still a work in progress. He wants to start extensive renovations in February, to extend the cellar, add more space to the front bar and provide a more comfortable entrance, though he's working closely with architect David Brown to ensure the character of the place doesn't get sacrificed in the process. He wants it so that the car park will still have locals' Harley-Davidsons and dusty utes parked among the visitors' Lexuses and Range Rovers.

The reason folks from town make the journey south is for the Victory's dining experience – a tidy marriage of food, wine and setting. There's a well-rounded menu from chefs Todd Steele and Glen Robson, with a noticeable touch of Middle Eastern and South-

East Asian accents to the ModOz flavours; chicken, lime leaf and mint spring rolls (\$7.90), crispy skin duck leg with green papaya salad, coconut rice and Thai chilli dressing (\$20.90). But the smart diner will be ordering off the specials board (actually, it's a roll of butcher's paper hanging from the wall), where they'll find the freshest local seafood prepared in interesting ways, and a list of desserts that amuse the chef on any given day. For instance, after a shared entrée plate of fried whitebait on rocket with garlic aioli (\$10.90), we enjoyed smoked trout on blinis topped with crème fraiche and a dollop of salmon roe (\$13.50), and tommy ruffs in a rich red curry sauce on a bed of sweet potato mash (\$17.50).

This all sounds very clever, though it's far from pretentious. The kitchen doesn't indulge in prissy presentation. The table settings are sparse. Staff take meal orders at the table, but drinks are obtained from the bar. This may appear too casual for some visitors with lofty expectations, but Doug refuses to apologise. It's a pub, he insists, not a restaurant.

But then Doug has a wine cellar that would put virtually all restaurant wine lists to shame. A lifetime of collecting has built up a 300-wine selection in a 5m by 5m cellar dug beneath the dining room; next year's renovations will connect another 20m by 5m cellar to this, so get ready for an explosion of other wine choices that you can select for yourself and present at the bar for decanting, before being presented at your table with quality glassware. "OK, OK, so it's a pub where you can enjoy a really good glass of wine," says Doug with mock exasperation. "Well, that's what I want when I sit down to relax. And I don't think I'm alone there. I don't know anything about a pub not being able to provide great quality. But I know damn sure that posing and phonies and ridiculous prices don't have to be a part of it, either." 🍷