



A feast for the eyes

Even the most exquisite plate of food can be enhanced by all that surrounds it, writes **CARRIE HUTCHINSON**, which is why restaurateurs spend time and money choosing art for their venue walls.

PHOTOGRAPHY PHILIP CASTLETON.

IN JANUARY, JOSH NILAND FOUND HIMSELF ON a Copenhagen stage with a five-kilogram pike perch. He was speaking about gastronomy as artistic expression, while breaking down the fish, at the Convergence Symposium. “There’s a certain inconvenience and craftsmanship to create this very finite product,” he says a couple of months later, back in Sydney and reflecting on the relationship between art and food. “It’s somebody sitting there, applying their emotion, their thoughts, their experiences – a combination of so many things – all colliding into a finished product on paper or on a plate. I think that makes it so special.”

For those who’ve dined at his restaurant, Saint Peter, Niland’s strong feelings about the inherent similarities between the work of an artist and a chef may come as no surprise. On the plate he manifests dishes like yellowfin tuna Wellington and coral trout millionaire bon bon, while on the walls hang original works by the legendary Ken Done. It was a relationship that began when the artist, famous for his splashy depictions of Sydney and its harbour, visited the first iteration of Saint Peter and offered pieces to display on its austere walls.

Now, with Saint Peter located at the Grand National Hotel in Paddington, Done is once again front and centre, his red *Outback* (2023) piece greeting guests on entry, while his iconic colourful works and lesser-known black and white pieces appear on the dining room walls.

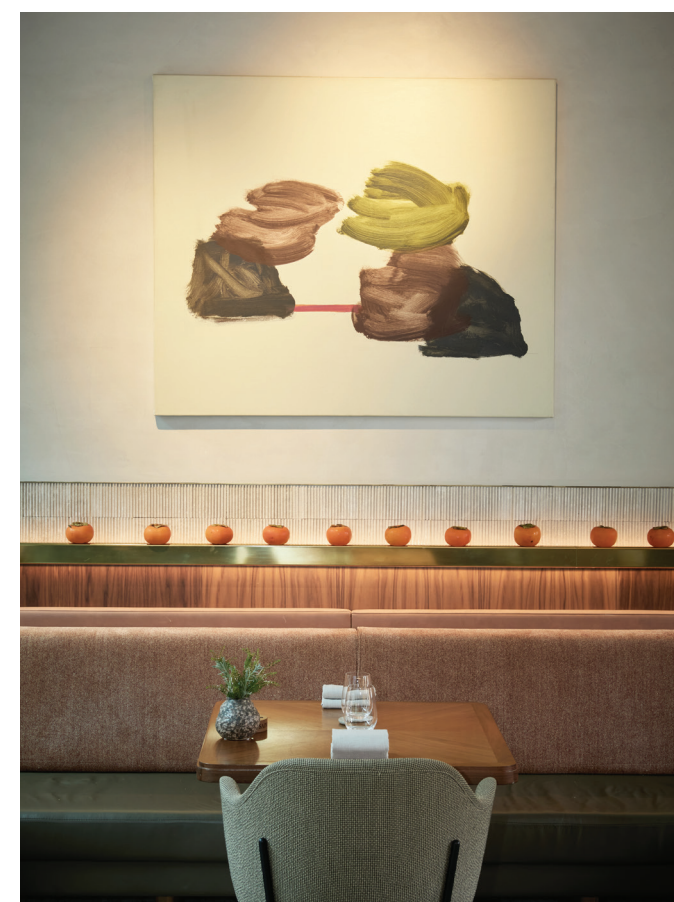
“We’ve got this spectacular one now called *Reef February*, from 1994, and it honestly makes you feel so happy when you look at it,” says Niland. “It’s also been the catalyst for a lot of thinking with regards to some of the dishes we do.”

The relationship between art and food isn’t new. When humans still lived in caves, fats and blood – the leftovers from beasts hunted for sustenance – were mixed with ochre and charcoal to draw pictures on stone walls. The Last Supper is one of the most widely depicted events in art history. La Colombe d’Or, founded in 1920, became a hub for artists and writers, who often donated their work for food and somewhere to sleep. Now diners come to the south of France for its simple Provencal cuisine and to appreciate works by Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, Henri Matisse and more.

Anyone who cares to read about brain chemistry will know there is a profound connection between good food and beautiful art. Scientists who study neuroaesthetics have discovered viewing art can trigger a rush of dopamine and other pleasure-inducing neurotransmitters. Food has the same effect: its form on the plate can be exquisite, but add desirable aromas, textures and flavours and it becomes a sublime multisensory adventure. Enticing



Clockwise from above: *Black Boat* (2019) by Ken Done in Saint Peter’s private dining room; and *Peppered Wind* (2022) by Michael Cusack at Saint Peter. Opposite: *Tuesday* (2025) by Ken Done at Saint Peter.





Clockwise from above: *Seduction* by David Warren at Besa; *The Electronio Sand Works* (2025), a collaboration by Nakatomi and Otis Hope Carey; and *Geisha Girl with Watermelon* by Nobuyoshi Araki at The Belongil.

lighting, textures and art enjoyed in the lead-up to the presentation of a dish primes the brain for engagement in the overall experience.

While the artwork on the walls at Hugh Allen's Yiaga in Melbourne's Fitzroy Gardens changes regularly – "just like the menu, the food, the wine and the seasons," the chef explains – he and his collaborators worked tirelessly on the details before the doors opened last October. The art isn't only on the walls or the plate; it is also the plate itself, along with the furniture and the bud vases on every table. "We wanted everything to feel unique to the space," Allen continues. "The aim was for the restaurant to feel and look as one-off as possible, so we engaged as many local makers as we could." They include Vivienne Wong, who made the table for the private dining room from a single cypress branch, and Alexandra Hirst, whose handblown water glasses are etched with native flora designs.

While many people travel to eat, it's entirely possible to map out a global itinerary featuring exceptional restaurants with memorable art collections. There's China Club in Hong Kong,

which holds a substantial portion of the late entrepreneur David Tang's collection, Manuela in New York City, a farm-to-table restaurant with commissioned pieces and other works from artists inspired by its Soho neighbourhood, and London's Mount St. Restaurant, where, among the vast display of 200 works are food-related pieces including Keith Tyson's incredible *Still Life with White Carbs*. Of course, there's also Massimo Bottura's Osteria Francescana in Modena, often cited as the best restaurant in the world and a showcase for the chef's exceptional contemporary art collection.

In her book *Aesthetic Dining: The Art Restaurant Around The World*, art collector and author Christina Makris noted only one Australian eatery: Paddington's Lucio's, which closed in 2021 after 38 years in business. When proprietor Lucio Galletto sold the 167-piece collection, which included works by John Olsen, Sidney Nolan and Tim Storrier, it earned around a million dollars at auction.

PHOTOGRAPHY JAMIE GREEN (THE BELONGIL) & JIVON KIM (BESA).

PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAEL PHAM.

While this type of in-house gallery might be beyond many restaurateurs' means, most now work hard to bring art and food together. At its newest venue, a tapas bar in Bondi called Besa, Esca Group's executive director Jorge Farah has included themed artwork. "*Toro Rojo* by Fernando Vieira was chosen to symbolise Spanish tradition and pride – hence, the bull, a deeply rooted cultural icon of Spanish identity," says Farah. Its position at the venue's entrance sets up diners for what's to come.

In Melbourne, Jo Gamvros, co-owner of Bar Lourinhã, has used her photographer's eye and talent for collecting to fill the walls with gilt-framed portraits, flamenco figurines, ceramic birds in mid-flight, vintage mirrors, antique plates, carved masks and hand-painted signs. Meanwhile Hassell Architecture built Di Stasio Città, set across the road from Melbourne's Treasury Gardens, to highlight pieces from Ronnie di Stasio's collection, including Shaun Gladwell's *The Lacrima Chair* and Reko Rennie's 31-piece installation. In Hobart, performance art is on the menu at Mona's Faro restaurant, as is a spin in James Turrell's *Unseen Seen*. Landscape Restaurant in The Henry Jones Art Hotel is more subdued, with its collection of landscapes by John Glover.

In Byron Bay, Shannon Bennett has made a splash with The Belongil, his four-venues-in-one project that opened in December. An art enthusiast for 25 years, he sourced some pieces, including photographer Nobuyoshi Araki's image of a geisha eating watermelon, and pulled others, like a photograph from Pieter Hugo's *The Hyena and Other Men* series, from his personal collection.

"Occasionally we get complaints or strange comments from guests saying, 'Why is this work here? I can't even eat with that in the background,'" he says of the Hugo piece. "But, honestly, that's part of what art should do – it should provoke, surprise and create conversation."

What Bennett has done in Byron Bay, which is new for him, is bring in artists to create site-specific work.

"Otis Hope Carey is a mate, and I wanted to create something that showcased both him as an artist and our friendship. The sand artwork collaboration with Nakatomi was exciting because it felt like a world first – creative, ambitious and a little risky – but I'm so glad we did it," says Bennett of the perpetually moving installation beneath diners' feet.

For the most part, he hopes The Belongil's artwork gives people a better idea of what the restaurant is about. "It reflects the character, style and personalities of the people working within the space," he explains. "To me, that's part of the true meaning of hospitality." ●



Clockwise from above: gilt-framed portraits, ceramic birds and vintage mirrors at Bar Lourinhã; and a photograph of Valencia's Central Market by co-owner Jo Gamvros at Bar Lourinhã.

