

eat drink



Can a restaurant in an office block be a haven for city workers? These two eateries outshine their locations, writes **Guy Griffin**.

hot

Photography **Jennifer Soo**

When someone says they're taking you to dinner in an office tower, do you reach for the taser? Who wants to see haunted elevators, deserted food courts and drained fountains? If you work in a big building, you probably have zero tolerance for revisiting one after-hours.

But you should make an exception for two new entrants to the CBD: Sepia Restaurant and Wine Bar at Darling Park and Bacco Pasticceria and Wine Bar in Chifley Plaza. Both are a tonic for white-collar workers with frayed nerves.

Sepia is the brainchild of seafood tsar George Costi, chef Martin Benn (Tetsuya's, The Boathouse) and Benn's partner, Vicki Wild. It shares a name with the ink squirted strategically by cuttlefish to deter unwelcome diners. By contrast, Sepia has removed the biggest natural deterrent to city diners: there's abundant parking under the building.

So you can dawdle at Sydney's best-designed bar with a glass of dry Vouvray (\$12), South Coast rock oysters (\$4 each) and the sublime piano of jazz maestro Bill Evans on the soundtrack, without copping a ticket on your windscreen.

Sepia's cleverly designed deco-style dining space shape-shifts from being a bare-table, Left Bank bistro for the office crowd during the day to a more romantic dining destination in the evening, with antique carriage lamps and deep-cushioned blue-green banquettes.

The flexible vibe allows Benn to serve a straightforward business lunch such as grilled wagyu sirloin with roasted baby carrots and confit shallot (\$45) and get edgier at night with a poached bass grouper, baby leeks, pickled cuttlefish, smoked ink and bacon powder (\$39).

Benn treats fish with reverence and once you've had his nine-course degustation option (\$130), it's easy to understand why he was the youngest executive chef at Tetsuya's. Sepia's "olego" is a memorable procession of Australia's piscine nobility: miniature versions of a brilliant butter-braised Murray cod with poached vongole, lovely Queensland spanner crab risotto with mustard butter and shellfish essence, and a fillet of confit Tasmanian ocean trout with braised shimeji mushrooms and bone marrow – and that's just three of the courses.

Sommelier Rodney Setter's wine list is compact and smart. Try a pinot from Chile, a fantastic young marsanne (great partner for shellfish) from famed Pemberton winemaker John Brocksopp or a hefty Cahors from France's south-west (it sizzles with wagyu).

Across town, the ground floor of the swank Chifley Plaza was terminally short of inspiration – until Bacco arrived, that is. I was as surprised as anyone to be there at breakfast, munching on some of the city's best cannoli with Single Origin coffee from Bacco's pasticceria counter.

Then it was back after work for a Bacco spritz (Soave, peach lemonade, white peach juice, \$13) from cocktail virtuoso Marco Faraone with a plate of spuntini (house-cut prosciutto and salami, crostini, zucchini flowers, \$9-\$14).

Bacco came about through the meeting of five minds: chocolatier Brendan Dewar, cocktail/wine consultants Faraone and Ben Moechtar and owners Ramsay Choker and George Michael (no, the other one). That's a lot of ego in one boat but it's even more surprising to see what they've fitted into Bacco's jewel-box-sized space. You'll find three prettily lit booths with seating for another 30 at tables, a sleek bar, glass salumi cabinet, woodpile wall features and an open kitchen. Most nights, the crowd in this wine bar is a combustible blend of barracuda-eyed baristas, smooth solicitors and an ensemble of other after-work players.

Everyone's chowing on decent Italian standards such as ravioli di ricotta (\$23), wood-fired lamb cutlets with garlic, rosemary and roast potatoes (\$29) and a winner tiramisù (\$12). Moechtar's wine list offers some top northern Italian wine estates by the glass, priced without greed.

Sepia and Bacco are stylish newcomers that civilise their corporate locations. Lose your preconceptions and put down that briefcase. Then tuck in a napkin. You've earned it.



**Sepia**  
Darling Park,  
201 Sussex Street, city.  
Phone: 9223 1990.  
Licensed. Open for lunch  
Mon-Fri noon-3pm; dinner  
Mon-Fri 6-11pm.  
Entrees \$22-\$28; mains  
\$32-\$56; desserts \$17-\$28.

**Bacco**  
Ground Floor, Chifley Plaza,  
2 Chifley Square, city.  
Phone: 9223 9552.  
Licensed. Pasticceria open  
Mon-Fri 7am-5pm; bar open  
Mon-Fri midday-late.  
Entrees \$8-\$22; mains \$28-\$32; desserts \$12.

**Above**  
The grilled wagyu sirloin  
at Sepia (top).