

Cool comfort
David's has found its niche, serving comforting food such as mother-in-law's fish stew (right) in breezy warehouse-chic surrounds.



After the fall

David's, the comeback kid of Melbourne dining, has regained its mojo with a fresh focus on its Shanghaiese roots, writes Michael Harden.

The rebirth tale, the one where a much-loved star goes off the rails, traverses a rough patch before reconnecting with what they do best and returning stronger and wiser, is more the stuff of movies than restaurants. In a competitive dining market, restaurants seldom get the chance to recover from rough patches because, if and when they do, everybody's having dinner somewhere else. But of course there are always exceptions to the rule and one of those exceptions is David's.

Some may argue the toss about the severity and length of David's rough patch, but anybody who has followed the progress of the restaurant over its 13-year history would have to be wilfully blind not to have noticed the confusion and listlessness that had set in. David's apparently lost sight of what made it popular in the first place – the refreshing novelty of a Chinese restaurant in a subtly hip, sparsely decorated side-street warehouse serving modern Shanghaiese food alongside excellent tea and wine. It had slowly morphed into a slightly stilted, overdecorated version of itself, not too far removed from many similar joints across town making a half-hearted stab at the top end of the market.

Tinkering at the edges had only exacerbated the problem. This time around owner David Zhou, the personable Shanghai-born tea importer who also owns the Oriental Teahouse chain, has gone the full monty, overhauling both the dining space and the menu. In some ways the restaurant is now back to where it started – clean lines, a Shanghai-inspired menu – but this latest version of David's is very much a rebirth, not a rehash.

There may be the slight whiff of marketing-speak about the "Country Shanghai" label that has been slapped under the David's name on the signage and menus since the overhaul, but it's actually a pretty accurate summary of the direction the restaurant is now heading.

The menu is more straightforward than in the past and is divided into user-friendly sections (Shanghai Snacks, Something Different, From the Sea) that position David's at the casual end of the spectrum. It's certainly a well-priced list, filled with dishes given heartwarming names – Mama Zhou's sang choi bau, Auntie's fried rice, mother-in-law's fish stew – that successfully add a down-home rusticity and a sense of



SEE THE FULL MENU HERE

To see the complete menu from David's, download the free Viewa app, select the *Gourmet Traveller* channel and hold your phone or tablet over this page.

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family lineage that's always appealing when done, as it is here, with authenticity and a bare minimum of cynicism.

The décor runs a similar line, with design firm Hecker Guthrie stripping back the space to emphasise its excellent warehouse bones while lining the walls with rough-hewn whitewashed timber panels that channel, in a home-decorating-mag kind of way, traditional Shanghai architecture. The carpets are gone, replaced with painted concrete and dark-stained timber floors. Linen has been eliminated, too, and the bare wooden tables, mismatched timber and metal chairs with their distressed paint detailing, plus designer rice-paper shades and a smattering of Chinese timber antiques bring a well-heeled beach-house feel to the split-level space. It could easily have been hokey and a bit designer-luvvy, but it actually feels fresh, breezy and original – particularly during the day when the main room is flooded with natural light from a series of sizeable skylights.

The service – a major factor in David's former malaise – has responded well to the changes. The staff, mostly of the young and enthusiastic ilk, may not be the most polished team of waiters in town, but they are efficient and friendly and possess a noticeable enthusiasm for the food that can add a further dimension to some of the dishes here.

Take the mother-in-law's fish stew. It's an excellent dish, as comforting as it sounds (providing, of course, that any mother-in-law experience you've had has been amicable), with pieces of nicely textured rock ling



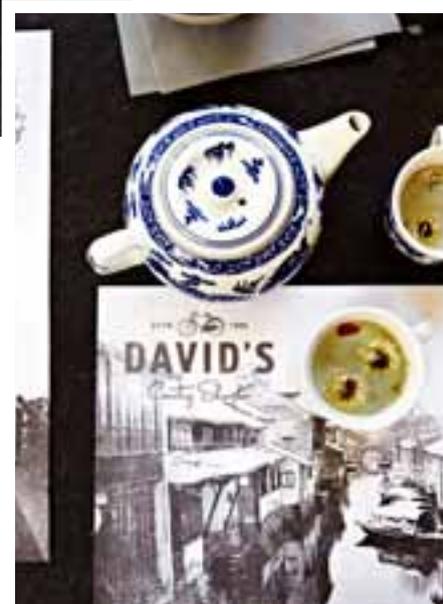
suspended in a slippery, slightly gelatinous broth flavoured with Shaoxing wine, garlic, ginger and spring onions. There are also shreds of dark-green, earthily flavoured "Shanghai spinach" in the mix, looking brilliant against the pale colours of the rest of the dish and bumping up its restorative, health-giving feel. It's a comfort food winner by name and appearance already. But when the waitress reveals that serving the stew always makes her homesick because it reminds her of the food her grandmother used to make, it's difficult not to look at the dish even more fondly.

There's a similar comfort element across the menu, with little in the way of confronting chilli heat, offal or unfamiliar ingredients to rock the boat.

The "Something Different" section of the menu is about as wacky as it gets, yet there's little to scare the horses there. In fact, a dish of quail eggs and beancurd, their white surfaces turned a pale tan from being dunked in a mix of spiced oolong tea (cinnamon, ginger, a little chilli) and light and dark soy sauce, is one of the best dishes on the menu. Grandma's 8, meanwhile, a mildly spicy, stickily sauced combo of scallops, prawns, pork, chicken, chestnut, cashew, bamboo shoots and shiitake, is a robust crowd-pleaser, full of textures and a marvellous salty-sweet balance.

The menu is certainly not short of crowd-pleasers but there's no feeling of dumbing down or compromised authenticity. Take the excellent spicy street duck wings, tender flavoursome beauties that are marinated and boiled with pepper and sweet soy sauce, then quickly dipped in hot oil before being popped into a simmering brew of oil and stock flavoured with cinnamon, star anise, fennel, dried chilli and ginger. They emerge beautifully flavoured, just salty and aromatic enough, with great street-food cred and crying out to be eaten with beer.

It's a similar situation with the, crunchy "one bite" soft-shell river prawns that arrive flash-fried with crisp>



Modern family

Above, from left: owner David Zhou (second from right) with his daughter and assistant manager Yanan Zhou (left), chef Xian Le, and wife Kathy Xu; Grandma's 8, a spicy Shanghaiese medley; Refreshing tea, with wolfberry fruit and chrysanthemum.

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extremities and tasting of ginger and soy, or the Drunk Chick, the subtly aromatic take on the traditional drunken chicken, marinated in rice wine and served in chunky slices at room temperature.

With many dishes on the menu so well suited to beer, it's a little surprising to see the fairly prosaic nature of the list of brews on offer. The most boutique the Aussie list gets is Little Creatures Pale Ale (though that brand is set to change), while the foreigners have Tsingtao as the only Chinese representative among the usual suspects from Europe, Japan and Mexico. At a time when Melbourne is swarming with boutique beers and intrepid importers, a snappier list of brews would certainly seem more simpático with the rest of David's new regime.

The wine list fits the brief better with a comforting range of often-familiar names, both benchmark and boutique. Aussie labels dominate, but among the aromatic white wines that are always a good match for food like this, the Old World is better represented, with rieslings from Germany, Austria and France and verdicchio from Italy rounding out the list.

There are also several pages of impressive red wines (including a greatest hits-like list of Australian shiraz and shiraz blends), ideal for dishes like the Country Comfort, an oddly satisfying casserole-like dish that combines slow-cooked pork belly (sticky from sugar, soy, rice wine) with chat potatoes added in the final stages of cooking, or with a sturdy, chunky eggplant number that's beautifully shiny and slippery, and straddles the sweet and heat camps with great balance and energetic flair.

There are a couple of standout versions of fried rice (the smoky, deep-coloured Auntie's with Chinese sausage versus the more delicate, vegetarian Buddha's with bok choy and egg) and some excellent vegetarian dishes including a sublime mixture of mushrooms and tofu, a soft and slippery corker flavoured with spring onions, garlic and ginger.

Desserts make a strong showing too, with sweet stuff for those who like their sugar to the fore, and for those after a more traditional, textured experience where sweetness is just another part of the equation. The sweet camp should head straight for the dumplings filled with molten white chocolate, topped with

shattered peanut and coconut praline and served with ice-cream. Those going trad could opt for a decent black sticky rice pudding, but the ridiculously chewy, rose-flavoured texture of the aptly named glutinous pulling cake is a lot of fun and instantly addictive.

There's something reassuring and uplifting about rebirth tales because they speak of second chances and experiences absorbed. It's certainly the case with David's take on the story, a lesson in how to step back and identify what's good so there's no baby-and-bathwater scenario, but also to recognise when large parts of the plan need to be jettisoned. This latest version of David's is a cheaper, more casual and perhaps less ambitious restaurant than it was in the past, but it's a better place for those very reasons.*



Sauce code
The self-service table and spiced oolong tea quail eggs (below).



DAVID'S
4 Cecil Pl, Prahan,
(03) 9529 5199,
davidrestaurant.com.au.
Licensed.
Cards AE MC V EFT.
Open Lunch Mon-Fri
noon-3pm, Sat-Sun
11.30am-3pm; dinner
Mon-Thu 6pm-10pm,
Fri-Sat 6pm-11pm,
Sun 6pm-10.30pm.
Prices Entrées \$6-\$14,
mains \$10-\$30,
desserts \$9.
Vegetarian Four entrées,
four mains.
Noise Bustling.
Wheelchair access No.
Plus A tired favourite is
given a new lease on life.
Minus Little challenge for
the more adventurous
diner.

and also...

THE KID'S IN THE PICTURE

The Windsor end of Chapel Street gathers further bar-with-good-food momentum with Kid Boston joining the throng. Chef Dylan Evans, whose previous gigs include time at Noma, serves the likes of chilli octopus, confit lamb and roast quail – well matched with excellent cocktails mixed with house-made purées and syrups and house-infused liquor. *Kid Boston, 44 Chapel St, Windsor, (03) 9939 5256*



NEW ERA

Angie Giannakodakis, formerly of Press Club and Hellenic Republic, has opened Epoque, a casual diner and bar in a grand Victorian terrace in Carlton. Downstairs, the moodily lit dining room serves pan-Euro food – veal sweetbreads, kalamaki lamb skewers, salt-cod croquettes – alongside an Old World-favouring wine list. Upstairs is the delightful Hannah's Bar with its wide verandah and views of the Carlton Gardens. *Epoque, 49 Rathdowne St, Carlton, (03) 9036 4949*

DO YOU KNOW THE WAY?

It's no surprise this restaurant is so good-looking – co-owner Orio Randi is the man behind Arteveneta, the furniture company that's put its stamp on the likes of Vue de Monde and Izakaya Den. The pizza and pasta menu, courtesy of Andrea Mantese (ex-Fratelli Paradiso and Caffè e Cucina), is at its authentic best with dishes like casarecci con salsicce, plus a snappy wine list and nicely constructed cocktails. *The Way to San Jose, 135 McKinnon Rd, McKinnon, (03) 9578 6550*