



📷 Meat Packing District has arrived in a multi-zero burst of designer good looks, writes Dan Stock.

Melbourne

Meat Packing District in Berwick brings high-end steak to the suburbs

Dan Stock, News Corp Australia Network

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AND the leading contender for this year's best-looking restaurant is found in ... Berwick?

Yes, really.

Meat Packing District has arrived in a multi-zero burst of designer good looks and wouldn't look out of place in the area of New York from which it takes its name.

But just throwing money at a former nightclub — said to be \$3 million or so — is no

guarantee of success, especially when creating a steak house.

But owners Robert and Victor Zagame briefed the design team well, which has kept the look on-theme without picking up the cookie-cutter.



📷 Meat Packing District's steak kitchen.

From the dark and moody entrance hall, lit with red neon, through the clever demarcation of the 200 seater into different spaces using different leathers and hides, it's a package that makes a stylish statement without shouting.

Sure, the steak kitchen theme is acknowledged at every turn, whether meat cleaver handles on the toilet doors, or the skulls scattered throughout — including an excellent driftwood sculpture taking pride of place above the fireplace — but hanging greenery and real candles temper it all with a homely comfort.

It's really quite an achievement.

A floating wine “cellar” is a twinkling repository for the 250-strong wine list that's been created by Banjo Harris Plane — ex Attica, now proud co-owner of the great Bar Liberty in Collingwood — who has consulted on the list that is as easily accessed for those on a budget (including clever 300ml carafes) as those who may avail themselves of a \$1200 bottle of Grange.

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📷 The interior at Meat Packing District.

There's good drinking from here and far to be had for less than \$50 a bottle, though spend a few dollars more and you'll be rewarded with better value drops.

Leading the kitchen is Chris Bonello, yet another CBD expat putting down roots in zone 2. Bonello was most recently group executive chef across the Vue de monde group, and this high-end experience shows through his menu that, along with being a shrine to steaks of lesser-known cuts, ticks off all sorts of current trends: 63-degree egg and chargrilled lettuce and ceviche and chickpea fries, et al.

There's smoking, of course, and two thick fingers of ocean trout have a delicate smokiness that daubs of avocado mousse creamily complement.

A few roe pearls add pops of oily sea, though rocket oil adds little other than vibrant colour.

It's pretty, though expensive at \$23.

On the opposite side of the scales, crisp-fried batons of pork jowl stand guard around a duck egg's gooey-yolk, the golden orb adding sticky sauce to shards of crispy kale atop.

Big chunks of toasted bread add crunchy heft and, with lemon zest cutting through the richness, it's an accomplished dish (\$18).

The steak tartare was less successful.

The meat, though good quality, was minced to a mush and was too heavy handed on the Tabasco spice.



📷 Duck egg with pork jowl.



📷 A view of the steak kitchen.



📷 Lamb steak.

The acidic bite of cornichons was missing in the mix; witlof only partially replacing with bitter crunch (\$19).

Though disappointing, it shone next to the steak, which was no better — and probably worse — than you'd be served at a backyard barbie.

Our 200g Rangers Valley popeseye — a thin cut of rump — was overcooked; from medium through medium well, it had long sent its condolences to medium rare as ordered; likewise any subtlety to the meat that was thick with a heavy char.

For any restaurant, let alone a steakhouse, it was supremely sub-par.

Thankfully, the lamb — a dual cut of thick skirt and shoulder — from Flinders Island was superb, with tiny whole turnips served with their leaves a clever touch (\$37).

Sides also win. Whether the excellent harissa heat and smoky paprika depth to the bowl of blackened kernels that made up the creamed corn, or the coal-roasted pumpkin all chabby and soft, served with ashed yoghurt, they are equally interesting and delicious.

But at \$14 and \$12 respectively they are expensive, and steaks — which start at \$32 — are unadorned so you'll need at least one.

That fit out comes with a price: oysters are an outrageous \$6 a pop (that's \$72 a dozen, no thanks very much), and a venison main breaks the \$50 barrier.

At those prices you'd want the experience to be seamless and neither side of the kitchen pass yet completely holds up its side of the bargain.

Service, while young and keen and learning on the job (and that's to be applauded) needs a firmer guiding hand: while things went smooth enough when busy, resetting tables should never take precedence over customers at the end of the night, especially when our dessert went MIA.

MPD is a looker, to be sure, but it still needs to work on its character.