

Drop-dead delicious

Good things come in small packages at The Undertaker, writes **Bob Hart**



▲ **Say cheese:** the fine cheese list includes a creamy Cashmel Irish blue.

► **Sizzling sausage:** cotechino boiling sausage mounted on white beans with a mohawk of salsa verde and strips of cavalo nero.

► **Resting place:** The Undertaker combines a cool cocktail bar and lounge with a quality restaurant.

▼ **Rabbit food:** the rabbit schnitzel with oregano, tomato and fetta melt.

Pictures: DEAN CAMBRAY



What we drank

THE wine list is as well put together as every other aspect of the place. Order a glass from the pleasing Hewitson range from the Barossa — the 2004 Mermaid dry muscadelle (white) at a reasonable \$6.50 or the same maker's fine Miss Harry GSM (red) at \$7.50. Or settle in between with the superb 2004 Charles Melton Rose of Virginia, also from the Barossa, and a rose ideally suited to this food. Great value at \$32 a bottle.



It's rosy: Charles Melton Rose

► THE UNDERTAKER

329 BURWOOD RD, HAWTHORN
PH: 9818 3944

Lunch and dinner daily. Licensed.
Expect to pay \$50 plus wine for three courses.

SOME restaurants just tick over quietly for years, offending nobody, but being entirely without character or soul.

Such places eventually fade from view; they fold quietly and leave no evidence that they ever existed.

Then there are inspired places like The Undertaker which, within weeks of opening, is firing on all cylinders and taking its poorly served local market by storm.

This clever place, a restaurant with a cool cocktail bar and sleek lounge, has become an instant institution with an enlightened approach to very good, reasonably priced food.

The name helps: how could you live close to a place called The Undertaker without, at the very least, popping in for a stiff drink?

Where else would mature supporters of the brown and gold go, late on a Friday night, to get seriously embalmed?

My mate and I, however, were on a different mission: we had eaten chef Diane Kerry's tucker before — at Blake's, Red Orange, Diningroom 211, No 3 Station Pier and elsewhere — and were keen to eat it again.

Lunchtime Friday is not a time at which many suburban establishments are exactly on fire.

But The Undertaker was buzzing.

And after working our way through the tantalising menu and romancing a fine, chilled bottle of rosé and a few tumblers of moscato, so were we.

This is yet another establishment that promotes the idea of small plates to share — offerings that are either generous entrees or modest main courses, depending on your point of view.

Sixteen of these are on the menu, and there are only five serious mains — steak, spatchcock and the like — for those in need of that sort of thing.

We, however, stayed with the smaller plates, and ordered a flock of them. And all were superb: Kerry's food has never been better.



try

The Undertaker offers stylish, smaller courses in line with what is clearly a trend. And in my view, a good one. Other places in which you can build a fine meal of small dishes include:

- **Basque**, 159 Chapel St, Windsor. Ph: 9533 7044
- **MoVida**, 1 Hosier Lane, city. Ph: 9663 3038
- **Ay Oriental Tea House**, 455 Chapel St, South Yarra. Ph: 9826 0168
- **The Fawcner**, 52 Toorak Rd, South Yarra. Ph: 9820 1000

We began with a generous bowl of mussels — gigantic Spring Bay beauties that had been steamed with fennel, riesling and Pernod (recipe below).

The quality of the jumbo molluscs and the broth in which they wallowed was just exemplary.

The dishes at The Undertaker tend to arrive in threes spaced along a wooden serving platter.

With our mussels, for example, came a brace of excellent duck and sherry pastries — light and puffy with a clever onion and orange marmalade for dipping.

And on the same platter came a serving of artichoke and broadbean croquetas — marvellous little crumbed, crunchy balls with a dip of perfect saffron aioli.

Show off your mussel power

recipe

AT THIS time of the year, we should all be eating mussels. Buckets and buckets of them.

They are an outstanding, home-grown product — the Spring Bay ones, as served here, are the best — and they are cheap.

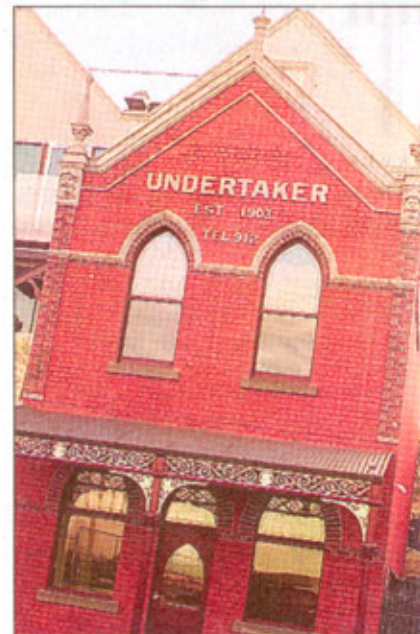
Diane Kerry prepares them with fennel and riesling — something you can easily manage. Try this:

- Ensure 1kg of large, fresh, Spring Bay mussels are ready for the pot — scrub and de-beard if they are not the pre-shaved ones. There should be at



least 16 mussels to the kilo, probably a few more.

- Heat a large pot, capable of holding at least 5 litres and with a lid. When very hot, add a generous glug of EV



Those first three dishes were dispatched briskly and a second platter arrived — this time loaded with rabbit schnitzel, briks of spinach, pine nut and harissa, and brandade cakes.

All of these, too, were as good as could be — the dainty little schnitzels finished with a dollop of oregano, tomato and melted fetta, the briks bursting with mid-east flavours and the crunchy brandade cakes accompanied by a rich, silky romesco sauce, one of my favourites.

And finally, a brace of dishes from different cultures: thick slices of wonderful, paprika-driven Spanish chorizo sausages that had been cooked in cider which had then been reduced to a rich glaze; and a serving of even sturdier slices of Italian cotechino boiling sausage, generously flavoured, meltingly tender, finished on a ribbed grill, mounted on white beans and dressed with a mohawk of salsa verde and strips of cavalo nero.

The great thing about a menu like this is, if you build meals from small plates, each visit can provide a fresh dining experience.

Fine cheeses followed, including a creamy Cashel Irish blue from Tipperary and, naturally, pudding. We addressed a glorious steamed-apple creation bursting with fruit and served with calvados cream. Yum.

Kerry says her objective is to produce approachable food which diners can make as much or as little of as they like.

My advice: make much of it — soon.

olive oil. To this add 2 cloves of finely chopped garlic, 4 peeled and finely sliced shallots and ½ a head of sliced fennel. Saute for about 15 seconds, or until the vegetables have just begun to soften.

- Add the mussels, 1 cup riesling, 2tbs Pernod, ¼tsp white pepper, ¼tsp salt and ¼ bunch flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped. Put the lid on the pot and cook on high for 2-3 minutes.
- Using tongs, lift out mussels as they open. Replace lid, return to heat and shake pot gently until all have opened. Serve in bowls with the juices, including the slices of fennel, and with chunks of crusty baguette.