

Herald Sun

# extrafood

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## Read 'em & eat

Respected Herald Sun food critic **Stephen Downes** reveals his best restaurants of the past year

TALY rules, right? Well, at least it's king of Victorian eating out. No one can deny it.

**Joint restaurants of the year**  
Rinaldo's might be several hours from Melbourne, but please make the effort

magnificent red gum, vines and distant hills.

And the wine list, which I called a "work of genius", features the famous King Valley drops made by the Pizzini and Dal Zotto families.

The Italian couldn't be more different. It's large, sleek and contemporary, a Latin brasserie in the heart of the city where baby chicken will be served succulent and deftly flavoured with chilli, lemon and spices. I tried sublime starters: Venetian tripe, and wide pasta strips punctuated with duck flesh braised in shiraz vinegar.

Leave room for the ice cream.  
• Rinaldo's reviewed in August, The Italian in July.

### Best Chinese

Cina offers astonishing value, a near-perfect wine list and the option of BYO.

A fairly recent addition to our town's surfeit of Chinese eats, it specialises in Malaysian and northern Chinese cooking. Scrupulously clean, comfortable and modestly stylish — there is a dimmer and swisher area down the hall beyond the kitchen — it tabled fine, fresh flavours and textures when I visited. I thought an Assam beef curry was spectacularly good,



**Meat so tender you could serve it at creches and to the very toothless**



### Best Thai

I'm usually fairly suspicious of Thai tucker. I've tried too many untidy and lazy offerings in the name of Siam.

But newcomer Charm is terrific. A modest, shopfront place, it was the spiccest and spannest restaurant I could remember, tabling brilliantly fresh flavours with more zap than a Taser. It takes an extra-special place to do something new with Thai fishcakes.

Charm's were golden-tanned, had a perfect light-rubbery texture and strong flavour.

They were enhanced with short lengths of snake beans and lime-leaf shreds. A "roasted" chilli paste coated copious curled tickets of pork in a wonderful brown juice, and big spring rolls of prawn tail, chicken mince and vegetable shreds were contained within the cracklingest flaky pastry I've eaten.

• Reviewed in February.

### Best Greek-leaning

More Cretan than strictly Greek, new bistro Philhellene calls its dishes "Greek provincial".

And it doesn't really matter what its influences are once you start eating.

The moussaka was the best I've eaten, and the wet-roasted goat is sublime, the meat so tender you could serve it at creches and to the very toothless. An