

THE MAGIC PUDDING

The driveway winds up a gentle slope towards De luliis winery. Off to one side you'll find Butterflies Gallery and gift shop, but what you are really after is the door to the left, the one to Cracked Pepper, the domain of Julie van den Berg and her team.

Lunch can be a relaxed selection of dishes to share or you can choose to follow a dinner format and go for an entree, main and dessert. With the whole afternoon ahead of you and nowhere much to go what could be better than to enjoy a long lunch.

And Julie has put together a list of lunch specials to help you in your decision. Today, there's a risotto with duckling, there are scallops and pork belly, or prawns and fettuccine for entree; there is a Berkshire pork cutlet, red emperor fillet, or chargrilled Hunter beef for mains; there's also something pretty special for dessert.

One of the dishes from the regular lunch menu appeals, with its promise of new-season asparagus. Six perfectly trimmed spears are chargrilled and tender and paired with sweet, caramelised slow-roasted tomato cheeks. In place of the usual parmesan, there's shaved Manchego cheese. To round it out – a drizzle of local olive oil and a splash of balsamic syrup; great ingredients treated well.

Three plump seared scallops perch on a smear of creamy cauliflower puree and sticky jus. The slow-cooked pork belly is fork-tender and succulent, with lingering flavours of lemon, fennel and chilli.

A disc of sticky rice mixed with chopped choy sum, chilli and fresh turmeric supports a couple of pieces of crisp-skinned flaky red emperor fillet. Three cylinders of prawn boudin stand like sentinels around the plate,



CRACKER FIND: Cracked Pepper Restaurant is a lovely place to spend an afternoon.

PICTURE: PETER STOOP

linked by streaks and drizzles of olive oil and balsamic syrup.

The dish of the day has to be the beef. One medallion of chargrilled just-the-way-you-like-it Hunter beef stands in line with a decadent disc of buttery potato galette and another of shredded, fall-apart, slow-cooked Wagyu shin meat. The meats are wrapped in spinach leaves and the whole united by a rich jus. Thank goodness for the potato, or you would have to lick the plate.

When the new South American sous chef offered to make cheesecake Jules didn't expect a cake with chunks of cheddar cheese melting through it. But it gave her an idea. Warm poached quince and blue cheese "pudding" is an individual warm cake with long poached slices of quince on top and blue cheese melting through the cake. It's a sort of Middle East meets France with its crown of Persian fairy floss, the cheese, and very good house-made vanilla bean ice-cream melting on top. A circle of quince poaching liquid provides some sauce.

Forty years ago when the now vigorous wine industry was in its infancy you could barely find a sandwich in the Hunter Valley. Now restaurants, particularly those associated with

QUICK BITE

What: Cracked Pepper Restaurant

Where: 1616 Broke Road, Pokolbin

Prices: Entrees, \$15.50 to \$20.50; mains, \$36.50 to \$38; extras, \$7.50 to \$8.50; desserts, \$15 to \$17.50

Chef: Julie van den Berg

Wines: A full list of De luliis wines plus two French champagnes, eight by the glass. BYO \$8 corkage per bottle

Hours: Dinner, Friday and Saturday from 6pm; lunch, Friday to Wednesday; espresso coffees and leaf teas, daily; brunch, Saturday and Sunday from 9.30am

Vegetarian: Separate menu with 11 dishes and comprehensive selection of gluten-free dishes

Bookings: 4998 7076

Bottom line: Entree, main and dessert for two, about \$150 without drinks (much less for lunch)

wineries, are thick on the ground in our premium wine areas. Cracked Pepper? It's certainly a cracker.