

Memories of flavours past inform the ever-shifting offering at Pilot. – one of Canberra's favourite kitchens away from home.

Words Ashley St George Recipes Pilot. Photography Lean Timms

All in the Family

"

ey mum, is there bread burning on the grill?"

That's Pilot's head chef Malcolm Hanslow, and he's not yelling out to his biological mum, but rather Alice, one of his chefs, who the team affectionately refer to as 'mum'.

"She's like the mum, she looks after everyone," he laughs. He refers to the restaurant as having a family vibe. "I think because you spend so much time together and you spend a lot of time obviously working at standardised family times, you know?"

The 30-seater restaurant has become a dining destination since its founding in 2018, opened by three mates who all met working at restaurant Eighty-six in Canberra's city. Partners Dash Rumble and Ross McQuinn along with chef, Malcolm Hanslow, took a few years travelling and working at establishments the likes of Automata and Oscillate Wildly before reuniting with the vision of Pilot.

Despite attracting people from far and wide, it's common for them to get the feedback that it feels homey. It's nestled in the suburban shops of a leafy inner-north neighbourhood in Canberra, so it's approachable and familiar from the outset. Soft sheers, wooden furniture and cloth napkins all contribute to the hominess – just like you've gone to a friend's place for dinner.

They don't publish the menu: Rumble prefers it to be a surprise when guests arrive. "It's kind of like – cool, you're coming to our house. Just trust us. We'll take care of you. Is there anything you don't eat? All sweet. Let's go," she says.

BUILT ON TRUST

In the beginning, there was no firm idea of what the restaurant would be. "But Ross and I knew that we would want Mal to cook and we'd just trust what he would do," explains Rumble. "So I guess everything was kind of built around that, and that idea of okay, you can do the food, let's just create a space that we would want to eat in."

"It's good because we have quite similar ideas, but we're also quite different people as well," says Hanslow. "So instead of being too identical and always just doing the same thing, a lot of the time someone will bring something and someone brings something else, and you trust them. I'm such a logical person, I never think of anything that's actually nice – putting up photos and putting plants in, I would never do that."

"You trust them enough that it's like, alright, they're doing this, which I think is pretty weird. But it's gonna work."

TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

It's not just the relationships between Hanslow, Rumble and McQuinn, it's the way they foster that amongst their team that makes the difference.

"Loving what you do and who you work with just makes it so much easier for you to provide a better product," says Rumble.

Hanslow agrees. "I just think if we all work together to have a nice place and if we create a nice place for people to come to work, they're gonna be happy and then it's gonna be easy for them to look after the guests."

Staff lunch is considered almost sacred, a time for the team to sit down together before a busy service and connect.

"That's what this restaurant is built around – people come in and share a meal and a conversation with each other. It's great that we can give that to people, but as well as that we have an allocated time where we can do that with each other," says Rumble. "We haven't missed one yet actually!"

"If you're going to work for a long time everyday, you need to make 10 minutes for yourself," agrees Hanslow.

It's these micro-moments between the team, the owners say, that contribute to the diners' overall experience.





As the person in charge on the floor, Rumble is always keeping an eye on how the diners are responding to the experience. “Even just watching guests watch the kitchen staff and how they interact with each other, they love it, and they love looking around the room and seeing that we actually enjoy what we’re doing,” she says.

FAMILIAR FLAVOURS

The menu items can sound simple, with familiar dishes like money bags and roast chicken having made appearances. It’s these simple dishes that everybody knows that seem to form the inspiration – the dishes that evoke memories and nostalgia.

“I eat pretty simply,” Hanslow says. “And if I can use my years of cooking experience to elevate simple things to something at a higher degree than they’ll mean stuff to people, you know?”

Hanslow shares his thought process behind a recent dessert. “I was thinking about making a caramelised Jerusalem artichoke parfait, which kind of tastes like a caramely, honeycomby sort of thing, like a honeycomb Maxibon. So we’re going to do an ice cream sandwich thing, in a way it’s kind of like a very, very fancy honeycomb Maxibon.”

The yoghurt flatbread pizza pocket runs in a similar vein, stuffed with romesco sauce. “It’s cool to be able to do a canteen thing in a fancy restaurant,” says Hanslow.

“I think it’s really great for this environment,” says Rumble, “because we do want to give people that kind of premium experience and give them something that’s a little bit different, but when they actually eat the food they feel comfortable.”

“So many guests will just be like, oh, this reminds me of that. Or, oh, this makes me feel this or now I feel warm and fuzzy inside, which is really, really cool that we can do that.” S



Marinated
and glazed
lamb shoulder