



Sydney has never been a better place to eat, as strolling around its easily accessible, leafy suburbs reveals.

NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

Clockwise from main image: Shelly Beach promenade; Luna Park amusement park; Papi Chulo's at Manly Pier; a friendly local cockatoo; terraced housing in Surry Hills.



With the cheeky allure of a follow-me finger, Sydney's tempting goodies keep regulars coming back for more and newbies seduced. Some treats are new, while others are tried and remain enduring and true. Occasionally, the cityscape throws up a spangly new building of architectural note and, just when you thought there was no room to move, it surprises with an entirely new development. In Broadway, just up the road from the CBD, a sprawling former brewery is now Central Park, the new \$2 billion residential, retail and park precinct. Pritzker Prize-winning architects Sir Norman Foster and Jean Nouvel have collaborated with a stellar line-up of Australian architects on the urban renewal.

The constant that continues to compel, though, is Sydney's natural beauty. Once the lands of the Cadigal tribe, four million people now call the city home, yet you can still find a slice of solitude to contemplate. Take a moment at the Botanic Gardens where statuesque trees tower over fat, white cockatoos grazing on pastoral-like grass and realise that only a few hundred metres away, deals are being done by city slickers. It's the harbour where the city's man-made and natural wonders converge in a way that hits you in the heart every time. Built on a former rocky outcrop and largest recorded midden in Australia, the Opera House, with its arcing, shell-like crescents, always enthral. In the evening, the unfolding scene of a burnt orange sun flickering into the horizon and the lights of Luna Park and the Harbour Bridge coming to life is filmic, fantastical, magical and majestic. It's like something Baz Luhrmann had a hand in.

Someone who really gets that shot is filmmaker turned restaurateur John Fink, who is behind the recently opened Bennelong at the Opera House. Probably the most anticipated restaurant opening of the year, Bennelong has been warmly received



Clockwise from opposite page: Another sunny day on Surry Hills' Crown Street; Jamaican flavours are the go at Rosie Campbell's; a side of chargrilled broccoli washed down with a local 4 Pines Beer at Papi Chulo; Sydney's botanic gardens.



because it celebrates its site, history and Australian-ness. "Twenty-four million Australians own the Opera House," says Fink, "and we want everyone to feel that this is their restaurant."

The egalitarian approach works – you can, indeed, simply drop in for a drink at the bar, sit in an original Fritz Hansen chair and ogle the view, or step it up with a meal by celebrated chef Peter Gilmore and his team for a relatively modest \$125.

Outside the heart of the city, much beckons. A generous handful of suburbs boast their own distinct character – from the artsy to the stylishly surfy. The Sydney food scene is constantly on the go and has never been better. With fine dining fading out, a new wave of eateries is seeking authenticity and integrity. We round-up three easily accessible suburbs in a city where you'll never go hungry.

POTTS POINT

The elegant enclave of Potts Point is sometimes overlooked for its proximity to notorious Kings Cross, but Sydneysiders know it's a gem. The streets are lined with Victorian terraces, deco apartments and a clutch of remaining Georgian mansions and sandstone villas, and within that mix a smattering of cheap backpacker joints keeps it real. The inner-city peninsula could almost be a slice of Europe.

On a ridge flanked by the Woolloomooloo naval base and the so-Sydney scene of Rushcutters Bay – where small white dogs zip between Bugaboos while their owners have animated conversations on mobile phones – the peninsula's streets are full of life. But for all its buzz, you can easily turn a corner and be the only person enjoying a calm



Clockwise from left:
At the Fitzroy Gardens organic farmers' market in Potts Point; a spot of French charm at Potts Point; Sydney's most iconic building, framed by a ferry; Norfolk Pines behind Manly Beach.



garden reserve, such as Embarkation Park, at the harbour end of Victoria Street, with its gorgeous water and city views. Named in memory of the soldiers who left from here for World War I, it was once dominated by stevedoring warehouses. If you want to feel virtuous before retracing your steps up Victoria Street, tackle the McElhone Stairs – with more than 100, they're known locally as the Stairs of Death or Doom.

Eating out in Potts Point has never offered greater pleasures. The newest addition to the neighbourhood comes from the staggeringly young restaurateur-chef, 21-year-old Josephine Perry – chef Neil Perry's daughter. She recently opened Missy French (missy french.com) and is earning praise for her French-style cuisine.

Another new offering is Waterman's Lobster Co. (watermanslobsterco.com), with its deliciously sufficient seafood dishes. Perfectly fried school prawns served with mayo and house salts, and wickedly buttery soft white buns topped with juicy lobster are accompanied by boutique beers and natural wines.

All excellent and markedly different, Billy Kwong, Cho Cho San and Ms G's do what Sydney does so well – take an Asian cuisine, or two, and spin it with a thrilling, contemporary take. Meanwhile, New Zealander Barry McDonald has made Fratelli Fresh (fratellifresh.com.au) a firm favourite for authentic Italian food in Sydney. The set lunch menu is a steal at \$25 for two courses and a glass of wine, or \$35 for three. After an incredibly generous bowl of sweet tomatoes and mozzarella, I had a mighty dish that has long held its place on the menu and in my heart – a tower of crisp, fat Parmesan-topped polenta fingers nestled in a mushroom and Gorgonzola picante sauce.

Since it opened nearly two years ago, Glider (**197 Victoria Street**) has gained a following for the authentic flavours of its Thai chicken burgers and duck rolls, made from family recipes given a twist by owners Pla and Mark Verhoeven. The couple are the only people on staff who make the sauces based on recipes passed down from Pla's mother and grandmother. The coffee is also beautifully crafted and the cafe is a great spot for people watching and listening. The couple recently opened their second Glider in Central Park.

Just across the road, a plaque lies in the pavement at 202 Victoria Street, the former home of activist Juanita Nielsen who disappeared in 1975 following her protests over proposed property developments in the street. Her body was never found and the apartment towers went ahead, obliterating harbour views from the elegant terraces that now look onto an expanse of brick wall. Nielsen's death is a link to the area's seamier side, of which you can still find traces. At The Roosevelt (theroosevelt.com.au), which the notorious underworld character Abe Saffron opened in 1947, there's a palpable sense of presence about the former nightclub. Saffron, who was linked to Nielson's death through his property-developer connections, drew legends Ella Fitzgerald, Sammy Davis Jr. and Frank Sinatra to perform here, which attracted Australia's wealthy and glamorous set.

The Hollywood glitz has faded and the floor space is a fraction of what it was, but that's all part of its appeal now.

If you want to see the kind of views Nielsen wanted to protect, book a table on the verandah at The Butler (butlersydney.com.au). This leafy oasis takes in the city and The Domain, and serves equally desirable cuisine and cocktails.

SURRY HILLS

Without a sparkly beach or dazzling harbour at its doorstep, Surry Hills has cultivated its artsy side in a way that is reminiscent of Melbourne. The neighbourhood works its way from Oxford Street, up Crown Street and the vintage stores that have existed at that end for years, to the constant hum of traffic on Cleveland Street in the north. To the west, Surry Hills extends to the slightly scruffy Central station. Now a hub of media and design companies, many of the warehouses have been converted into sought-after apartments, design showrooms and swanky offices. At street-level, tiny terraces – former workers' cottages – are less than three-metres wide and a contrast to the grand Heritage-listed Victorian and Federation-era terraces to the east. Almost at the heart of Surry Hills is the Brett Whiteley Studio (**2 Raper Street**), where one of Australia's foremost contemporary artists lived and worked in a converted T-shirt factory. The purple-painted gallery entrance, in a little laneway at the back of Bourke Street, features a miniature of Whiteley's work "Almost Once" – two oversized matches: one burnt, one live. The original was gifted by the artist to the city and stands in The Domain.



Left: Tom Dixon “Melt” lights and the art of the Yolngu people grace Bennelong restaurant. This page, from right: Sun strikes a sculpture in Manly; Toko in Surry Hills; the Brett Whiteley gallery in Surry Hills.



On the Saturday morning I visited, the front door opened to a life-drawing class and a fulsome woman posing on a cushion. Surrounded by Whiteley's art, students in smocks sketched to the sound of Japanese temple music. It's a scene that would have pleased the artist who saw “sexuality everywhere”. Upstairs, his studio remains largely untouched, its walls scrawled with quotes from his heroes Dylan, Baudelaire and Brâncusi. The gallery is free, a gem for art lovers and anyone seeking a slice of Surry Hills' history.

Now gentrified, it's hard to imagine the fortunes of this once swampy suburb rising and falling with gold rushes and the depression of the 1800s. The former slum is now one of the most desirable inner-city suburbs, but still retains a touch of boho chic, as well as eateries that have remained so good for so long that they continue to draw queues. If you have the good fortune to nab a table at the likes of **Porteño** (porteno.com.au), count yourself canny, while standing in line for a pastry and coffee at **Bourke Street Bakery** (bourkestreetbakery.com.au) is pretty much a given.

Smoke is drawing diners to the recently opened **Firedoor** (firedoor.com.au), where chef Lennox Hastie, who worked for five years in Spain's Basque region with the wood-fire gurus at Asador Etxebarri, is infusing meticulously chosen produce with smoky goodness. The results are deeply satisfying for meat and seafood lovers. There's an art to what Hastie is doing here and he's mastered it.

The brightly coloured blocks that spell **Besser** (besseritalian.com.au), the new Italian eatery on Crown Street, are disconcerting at first until you grasp the concept. This place is inspired by the owners' Italian-Australian heritage and the backyard gatherings of their childhood where nonnas bustled and authentic food was served in abundance. Honouring their roots, the bar is made with the besser blocks that were a classic feature of their suburban childhood homes. Casual, convivial, with food by dab Sydney hospo hands.

Offering nostalgia of a different kind, **The Soda Factory** (sodafactory.com.au) is a 50s-style favourite, serving fun times and Americana-style food, while **Rosie Campbell's** (rosiecampbells.com) captures the colour and flavour of Jamaica. There's also excellent Japanese at **Isakaya Fujiyama** (izakayafujiyama.com) and **Toko** (toko-sydney.com), and an exciting foray into Bangladeshi food at **Bang** (bangstreetfood.com.au).

MANLY

Manly is no longer the sleepy seaside suburb it was a decade ago, but it still retains its “someplace-else” vibe. With the main beach stretching to more than a kilometre of sandy perfection, it's clear to see why the peninsula town started colonial life as a Victorian seaside resort.



From top: A cafe in Surry Hills with a map that shows the source of its coffee; Glider in Potts Point; Fratelli Fresh.



Step off the 30-minute ferry ride from the city and in any direction are some of the city's top coastal walks. Hugging the Pacific Ocean, the beach and cliff-top walk from Manly to Dee Why is spectacularly scenic, as is the walk to the Spit Bridge, which takes in harbour beaches and inlets, sub-tropical rainforest, Aboriginal sites and coastal heath. But if you don't have three-plus hours to spare, one of the most accessible and beautiful walks (20-30 minutes) takes you to Shelly Beach, culminating at the headland for panoramic views of the Pacific. To get there, walk through the Corso – somewhat grandly named for Rome's Via del Corso – to pine-tree lined Manly Beach. Early settlers planted the pines in case colonial life didn't pan out and they needed the trees to build ships to sail back to Blighty. Turns out they stuck around and established the promenade to Shelly Beach in 1898, sprinkling parts of Cabbage Tree Bay Reserve with fantastically whimsical names such as Fairy Bower and Winki Pop.

There are even resident dragons! Albeit small, shy and endangered – you'd be lucky to see a water dragon. Try, also, to secure a sunny spot at one of the two eateries on the way – The Bower or The Boatshed. If you do, it's like a lifetime of good fortune has beamed down upon you – the sun shines, the water sparkles, the beauty dazzles.

At the headland above Shelly Beach, the views of the Pacific, the sandstone cliffs and enormous glistening rocks at their base, are remarkable. Watch skilled surfers tackle the rocks, rips and the righthand point break of Winki Pop. The Bower, at Shelly Beach headland, is one of Australia's top surf spots and part of the Manly National Surfing Reserve, one of seven areas in the world dedicated to protecting and preserving outstanding surf zones.

From the moment Hawaiian surf legend Duke Kahanamoku rode the waves here in 1915, Manly became the birthplace of Australian surfing. It's inevitable, then, that surf culture spills over into the town's laid-back cafes lining Whistler Street and Market Place (check out the mural here that is made up of headlines from the *Manly Daily*). Hang out with locals at the Steyne (hotelsteyne.com.au), the pub that has been here since 1858 – it's an old classic with contemporary twists, such as the Asian street food served at Harry Phat's. Another local favourite is Chica Bonita (chicabonita.com.au), loved for its fun-night-out atmosphere, Mexican food and \$11 margaritas.

Taking a prime position on Manly Wharf, Papi Chulo (merivale.com.au/papichulo), which loosely translates as "cool guy", is part of the Hemmes' hospitality empire. Perfectly executed smoke-house meats, seriously good seafood dishes, impressive cocktails and a well-crafted wine list are just a few things that make you want to linger.

STORY **JO BATES**

Photographs Jo Bates, Getty Images, Alamy

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