

## THE ART OF POSSIBILITY

John Ellison reviews *The Art of Lunch* at the Avalon Restaurant, Katoomba



**I AM A LITTLE NERVOUS** as this is my first job as a restaurant reviewer and I know nothing whatsoever about food. Mind you I am an enthusiastic eater, and will eat anything that is put before me: vegan, vegetarian,

carnivore, bush-tucker; kangaroo, witchety grubs – I will eat it all and with relish. However I have no more discrimination in this realm than your average goat.

Luckily I am accompanied by my partner Lyn Harrison who does understand cooking and hopefully will be able to guide me through the rapids.

To say that I have scored a job as a restaurant reviewer is a slight exaggeration, as Carolynne Skinner the editor of OZ Arts, has asked me to do a review of *The Art of Lunch*, a new cultural phenomenon in Katoomba that seeks to combine excellent food with some component of an art experience, such as a play or an artist's talk, along with an exhibition of paintings, or simply being up close with the musicians so that you can get your hands on them if that is your desire.

Some time ago, from 1991-96, I was the Cultural Development Officer for Blue Mountains City Council and I wrote a plan for cultural development, which later became known as Council's Cultural Vision Statement. The basic idea of that plan was that we, as a city, should try to capitalise on our truly remarkable cultural resources—I often say that we have an artist living under every stone—and if we must have tourism, which apparently we do, in order to make things thrive, let us develop a form of cultural tourism rather than just the dumb form of mass tourism that has people flocking to the Blue Mountains in order to look at the Three Sisters—or, as is so often said, "the blue mountain, could you please direct me to the blue mountain?" I mean we could easily just build one there at the roundabout, a huge concrete blue mountain opposite Dan Murphy's Liquor Store. But what I had in mind was something more like Winter Magic, the festival which brought tourists to the town for twenty-four years until it petered out under the weight of its own success.

In 1996 the incoming Carr Labor Government pro-claimed

the Blue Mountains the Inaugural City of the Arts. This was a central proposition of the Cultural Plan that I had developed: that a city, like a person, has a self-image that helps to guide its every action.

The mayor at the time I came to work in Council was Ralph Williams, who told me that his proudest achievement was to have a McDonalds restaurant installed at Blaxland. Allowing for Ralph's somewhat rogueish sense of humour, I thought we should be able to do better than that. A City of the Arts seemed to me a more admirable image than, say, the hamburger capitol of Australia.

So here we are at the Avalon restaurant, at the top of Katoomba Street. As we enter the foyer I am reminded of the old picture theatre I used to visit in Manly as a boy—the Odeon I think it was—where I was entranced by Johnny Weismuller playing Tarzan, along with Tom Mix and the great Hopalong Cassidy. Memories, memories, the place evokes memories; is this a part of the art experience?

We enter upstairs. I am clutching my leather bag containing a bottle of Sauvignon Blanc, which I find is a helpful adjunct, at any time, for the viewing of art, or for aesthetic experience of any kind. The joint is jumping; already the place is pretty well packed. I notice that there are two levels: the top level mostly occupied by people who had pre-booked and have nothing to do with the Art of Lunch, and the lower level for the people about to undergo the 'experience'.

Meg Benson, who is one of the main organisers of the event, greets us and gives us a choice of tables. She is a vital young woman and a non-stop organiser of music in the mountains. As soon as I am seated I draw out the bottle of Sauvignon and pour out a glass for Lyn and myself. Along the wall in front of us are large oil paintings, dashing rendered versions of the mountains landscape. These are works of Rachel Hannan, one of the two featured musicians for today's event, the other being John Stuart, teacher, composer, guitar

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virtuoso, and a person who dislikes mobile phones. Rachel and John have been performing together for twenty years or so, and pretty well know the ropes.

We are joined by Brad Diedrich at the table and his wife Libby. Brad is another of the main organisers of this event. He is a stocky, powerful looking individual, who back in Sydney fronted a punk-rock band, and looks like he could easily head-butt anyone who might be throwing beer cans or giving trouble. In Sydney he was in advertising, found the lifestyle too maniacal and came to the mountains for equilibrium and sanity. That's one of the interesting things about the Mountains: it is supposedly a healing place, always has been; formerly a sort of T.B. sanatorium, now a place people associate with a more relaxed lifestyle and mental health. If you walk the streets of Katoomba on a daily basis, you may not be so convinced of that proposition. A phrase that is often used is: *Normal for Katoomba*.

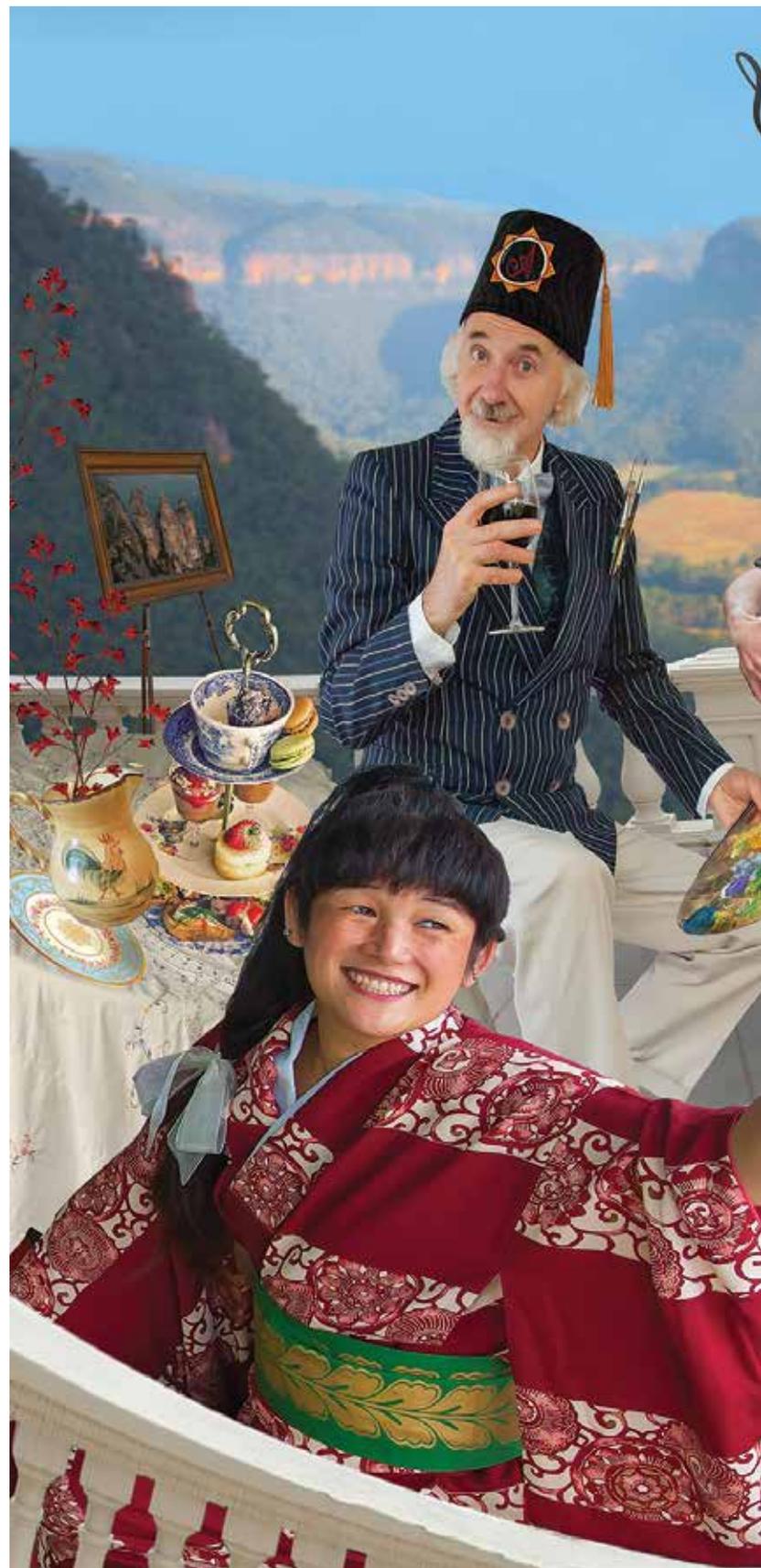
John Stuart and Rachel come in. They are both tall. Rachel has on a leather jacket, and bright cotton pants. John no longer sports a beard. When I first encountered him some twenty or thirty years ago, he could have passed for Bernard Shaw. Now he looks like a slightly world weary cowboy turned professor, with a knowing twinkle in his eye.

I pour Brad and Libby a drink. It appears that I am the only one with a bottle on the table, due to my remarkable foresight, and the fact that I am now a working member of the press; and I fall to musing about this proposition of *The Art of Lunch*.

How much do people really want to look at art? Visitors to the mountains for instance, do they really want to see art, be entertained by virtuoso musicians, see playlets about Rose Lindsay and such; or do they just want to fill their bellies with coffee and scones and move on to more distant horizons?

During my own exhibitions at the Nolan Gallery I will sometimes take a break by sitting on the side of the flower bed outside the gallery, and watch the cars speed by. There is a big orange sign out front saying Art Exhibition, but the cars show no sign of slowing down. Hundreds of them go past. Thousands. They are intent on something, and that something does not involve seeing my paintings. You can tell by the fixed expressions of the drivers and the hiss of the tyres that they are on a mission. Food and drink; food and drink; you can hear it in the throb of the engines. They are heading to Katoomba town for food and drink, and no local artistic pretender is going to get in their way.

It could almost be depressing if you were not a congenital optimist, which one really has to be these days in order to survive. But Maslow said – remember Abraham Maslow? – that there is a hierarchy of needs in human beings. First of



*Art of Lunch artwork Sue Daley*

all there are the basic needs: shelter, food, reproduction – survival needs you could say. Then on the next level there are social needs; the desire to be a part of a community; to raise a family; to care for others. Then further up the ladder still, there are needs for self-expression, aesthetic



enjoyment, self-actualisation, mystical experience and so on. But what he postulated was that you needed to satisfy the more basic needs first, before the more fancy self-actualising ones got a look in. In other words food and drink; creature comforts; and then later on, having satisfied

the inner beast, we might be able to give our attention to the more transcendental themes. Maybe that's what these people with their *Art of Lunch* concept hope to achieve.

Susan Cochrane, the third member of the brains-trust behind this enterprise introduces herself. An imposing

A stylized signature or logo, possibly representing the author or a brand, located at the bottom right of the page.

woman in a red dress, she looks like she could be the head of the Opera Trust. She tells me that the idea is to combine the three best things in life: food, conversation and art. She had formerly trialed the idea at Mt Tomah and called it *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which reminds me of the painting of Hieronimus Bosch.

John Stuart has begun to play. He is delivering a few Duke Ellington numbers and in spite of the loud conversation and hubbub around him, he remains intent and concentrated in his own world. A friend of mine once saw J.J. Cale perform at a Sydney venue and the audience pretty much ignored him and talked all the way through. She wanted to jump up and yell at them: Hey that 's J.J. Cale, right there in front of you! And you buffoons are not listening.

But what can you do? When people want to talk, they are going to talk. The problem is compounded by the fact that there is a large contingent for Meg Benson's birthday party. People are excited; they have paid their money and they will shut up when they feel like shutting up.

Meanwhile the first course has been served and we are told that the meals have been specially colour co-ordinated to reflect the colours in Rachel Hannan's paintings. For the record the first course was: Grilled vegetable, roquette and goat's cheese terrine, wrapped in braised leek, with a spiced capsicum swirl, which was... um, most acceptable. I thought of calling the chef out onto the main floor for

public applause the way Frank Harris used to do at the Café Royal; but decided that might be a bit ostentatious.

Rachel Hannan is introduced to the audience; it is time for her artist talk, an explanation of her artistic process and why she paints the way she does. Now this is a hard gig. For this sort of thing you need to be able to talk intimately to your audience. The concepts themselves are difficult to get across, and you need to damned well concentrate to take it in.

I am amazed at the woman's poise. The people on the upper level are gabbling away, but on the lower level they have become quieter, and for the most part they are listening to what Rachel is saying. She explains that she likes to get out in the bushland; out into the countryside; to escape from human beings in fact. She has four children, including an autistic child who accompanies her on these painting excursions. Rachel tells the audience that she tries to see the landscape afresh through the eyes of this child, and that she finds this very beneficial for her work. What honesty, I think to myself, and at once I feel a rising affection for Rachel and for all the artists in the Blue Mountains – people for whom it is the natural thing to speak with such openness and lack of guile.

More food is being served. Brad has now secured a bottle of his own and is pouring me a drink. I am beginning to enjoy this occasion a bit too much and remind myself to

*Photography Brad Diedrich*





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keep a measure of detachment as I am an official member of the press. The second course is mountainous: Rack of Lamb Diablo with agave sesame carrots, pickled saffron and turmeric cauliflower, sweet potato and salsa verde; once again colour co-ordinated.

John Stuart comes back on and gives us more of Duke Ellington. He is playing a six string guitar, which, he tells us, enables him to play the bass as well. The audience is receptive now, and John is really slipping it to them. After the entree and a rack of lamb the audience is somnolent and in the mood to be seduced. Who better to do that than the old ladies man Duke Ellington.

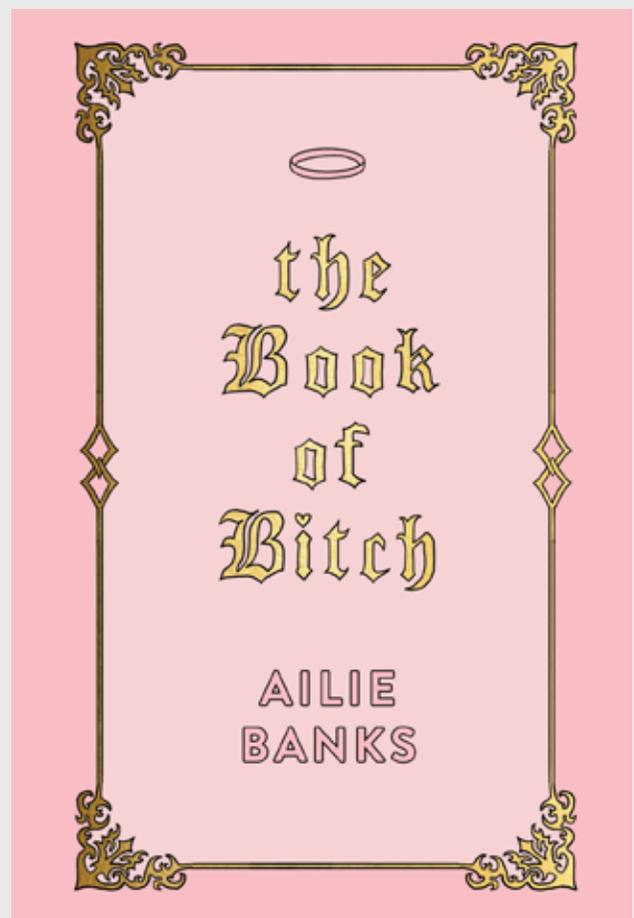
Rachel returns and sings a lovely version of *Moonlight in Vermont*, followed by *Stars fell on Alabama*. These two have been working together for so long that they don't even need to look at each other for their timing to be perfect. Meanwhile we have begun an intensely coloured third course: Forrest Berry and White Chocolate egg with crème de menthe reduction.

At this stage I am about ready to slide off my chair and take up happy residency under the table. The atmosphere has become most convivial. Naomi Parry, who has done a remarkable job in bringing Winter Magic back to life again after its unfortunate demise a year or two ago, tells me that Blue Mountains City Council is not keen on having the Grand Parade. I want to tell her that Council did not want to have Winter Magic in the first place; nor did Tourism; and if you allow the Council bureaucrats to dictate the terms then you will end up with a boring town indeed. However, my brain has become paralysed by too much food and drink, and I am just glad that there are zealots like her ready to take on such a thankless task.

We appear to be at the end of proceedings and people are in a general state of euphoria. The food, the artistry, the conviviality have brought the participants into a rare state of being. Perhaps this could be a new form of Tantric Yoga; how to find your blissful centre through intense sensory stimulation.

I think now, having recovered my wits, that what Meg, Brad and Susan are attempting to do is indeed admirable. The three of them are bringing fresh enthusiasm into the mountains. They are thinking in terms of possibility, artistic possibility; they are thinking of alternatives; they are thinking of joy. Our world leaders would like us all to be living in a state of perpetual fear. Artists on the other hand have always believed in Paradise Now. Maybe the Cultural Vision Statement written twenty-seven years ago is becoming relevant. Maybe the Blue Mountains could become a real City of the Arts. Time will tell; let us hope so.

John Ellison is a Katoomba-based artist and writer and was Cultural Development Officer at Blue Mountains City Council 1991-96



## THE BOOK OF BITCH by Ailie Banks Review by Mo Orkiszewski

*The Vanguard* was packed with women of all ages, buzzing with anticipation, lit by candlelight and the ubiquitous glare of mobile phones. Western Sydney musician Clarissa Mei set the tone for the evening singing songs of confidence, vulnerability & women.

After a short break writer Bri Lee and Ailie got down to the nitty gritty of how *The Book of Bitch* came about. Ailie was born into an artistic household, encouraged to draw and make art from the moment she could first hold a pencil. She was good at art at high school and duly went to art school at Enmore TAFE to become an illustrator. Freelancing from her home in the Blue Mountains, Ailie is making art that empowers and encourages women.

Ailie spoke of her role as an issues-based artist, observer and activist, visibly telling the stories that need to be told about sexism, mental health issues and being a feminist who is sometimes quite hairy.

One of my favourite questions for the night was from Bri asking which words were not used in the book, to which Ailie laughingly replied that Quirky and Kooky never made the grade. T for Tenacious Bitch was Bri's favourite letter and although Ailie said it was a bit rude to say which was her favourite, C for Crazy Bitch and O for Outspoken Bitch were mentioned to big applause.

The pink of the #metoo movement is celebrated with the colour of the book and Ailie wore the pinkest possible pantsuit set off with \$2 shop rhinestones. Both she and her book are powerful, vulnerable, street smart, confident, canny and very funny.

*The Book of Bitch* by Ailie Banks, Allen & Unwin, 2019  
[www.abanksillustration.com](http://www.abanksillustration.com)