



**Alain's Restaurant, Coral Esplanade, Cannonvale, Thursday to Saturday from 6pm. Phone 4946 5464.**

**By Deborah Friend**

I have often walked past Alain's Restaurant, down on Cannonvale Beach.

But despite there having been a restaurant on the site for as long as I can remember, I had never (until now) ventured to try Alain's out.

Was it the 'bookings essential' that put me off? Was it the 'French and international cuisine' that made me feel, perhaps, it would be a little too formal for me?

Whatever it was, all my preconceptions were blown away when I was fortunate enough to be a guest of Alain's one evening in May.

Armed with my trusty notebook, and my ever-supportive husband, we arrived at 7pm to be greeted by the sensational Sally, who, with her bow tie and black tuxedo over her floaty skirt, disarmed us straight away.

The restaurant itself is small but somehow – probably due to the fact that tables are not crammed in at the expense of guests' comfort – it only adds to the welcoming atmosphere and you certainly do not feel cramped.

The lighting was soft and warm, the table subtly decorated with a posy of fresh flowers and a small gas light you can adjust yourself and best of all, Charles Aznavore was crooning softly in the background.

We were seated by the window with a soft sea breeze rustling the bougainvillea outside the window that only served to increase our appetites.

In fact, something very strange happened to me at Alain's. Normally I'm a one-course girl when I go out but at Alain's I was drawn into a gastronomic web where the more I ate the more I wanted to eat!

As we were having our first glass of wine (the restaurant is licensed but you can BYO wine), Sally whisked out of the kitchen with a plate of hors d'oeuvres for each of us, explaining as she put them down that this was the first course of the six-course menu for which Alain's is renowned.

Hors d'oeuvres – or appetizers – are designed to get your gastric juices flowing and these looked so divine mine were going before I'd even tasted one.

Exquisitely made and dotted around the plate were six 'small temptations' as Alain calls them – or 'taste bites' as we nicknamed them. A slice of cucumber with houmus, a roulade of smoked salmon wrapped in a crepe and topped with caviar, a cherry tomato filled with mascarpone cheese, a delicate little filo pastry curry puff and a small crisp bread cracker with homemade chicken liver pate.

It was like having a delicious box of chocolates in front of us – which one should I chose next? – each one an explosion of taste and texture in our mouth. And best of all, we hadn't even had to think about ordering them.

By the time we had finished, our eating senses were so heightened we were practically grabbing at Sally to ask what was next.

She explained that we could chose an entrée and main course from the menu or specials board – a real blackboard with some options already rubbed out, which to me denotes they are 'real' specials not just additional menu items – and that while we were waiting for our entrée we would be treated to Alain's homemade brioche.

And what a brioche it was! Still warm from the oven it was light, fluffy and melt-in-your-mouth buttery soft and served with little dobs of tropical herb curry butter and chicken liver pate.

While we were still high from the 'just baked' smell, our entrees were put in front of us and again they were a work of art. But as always, the proof is in the tasting and my Balinese seafood platter did not disappoint with a medley of prawns, scallops and octopus gently cooked in a creamy, coconut curry sauce and served with rice and homemade pickles.

My husband went for the Hot Pot of Sweetlip New Zealand mussels and let's just say I didn't hear a word out of him for ten minutes as his eyes glazed over and all I could hear were Mmmmm sounds.....

By now we were so exhilarated by the rollercoaster ride that Alain takes you on, we could not wait for our main course but first we were given a delicate champagne sorbet to cleanse our palate in the traditional French way.

For mains, I had gone for the rack of veal, which came out pink, tender and juicy, while my husband had opted for the barramundi with vodka flamed prawns, a sensational treat for a lover of seafood and vodka, with the barramundi practically dissolving on the fork it was so fresh and perfectly cooked.

By now I was very full but there was no way I was not going to have dessert. We both opted for the crème brulee with a hint of orange blossom, served with strawberries and almond biscuits. It was the perfect consistency, light but creamy, with a delicate flavour that gently teased the tongue. Other desert options are chocolate gateau and profiteroles, all homemade of course.

By the time we had finished our dessert we had been eating for more than two heady hours but such is the quality of Alain's food and cooking, you feel buoyed not bowed, happy not heavy.

Alain is from Nice, in France, but he has lived in Australia for nearly 40 years and his traditional French influences (you can order escargots if you desire) are mixed with Australian and Asian elements.

He makes everything himself on the premises – he even grinds his own pepper – and this loving attention to detail shines through in the food.

As my husband said afterwards: "It wasn't trying to bash you over the head or be too shy you couldn't find it" (not bad after a bottle of cabernet sauvignon!).

We will definitely be returning to Alain's and are already thinking who in our family we can treat to the \$75 'set menu' - or should I say gastronomic rollercoaster. And yes, bookings are essential!