

## TOP OF THE WORLD

*One of Melbourne's best-loved restaurants has relocated to the top of a skyscraper with a design ethos that reaches for the stars.*

WHEN RINO AND LORENZ Grollo asked Shannon Bennett to shift his iconic fine-dining institution, Vue de monde, to the top floor of Melbourne's Rialto Towers in mid-2009, Bennett realised this was a one-off opportunity to create a restaurant of distinctive style and technology. Two years, thousands of hours and millions of dollars later, one of the most significant restaurant openings in Australia has welcomed its first guests.

Taking dining to another level in more ways than one, the restaurant that redefined sense-of-occasion dining in Melbourne is upping the ante and redefining itself. Bennett is bound to receive accolades, but he is the first to spread the word that this was a project of collaboration. The vision was of an internationally renowned restaurant intrinsically Australian in mood and character. The chef sought Australian artists, architects and craftspeople who shared this vision. Some, also, found him. >

PHOTOGRAPHER: MARCEL AUGAR PRODUCER/TEXT: MATTHEW HURST

A BESPOKE TABLE AND CHAIR SETTING BY MELBOURNE FURNITURE DESIGNER ROSS DIDIER, IN FRONT OF ONE PANEL OF A WORK BY ARTIST JOSEPH KOSUTH, AT THE RELOCATED VUE DE MONDE.

< “Reading about Shannon’s approach really got me excited,” says Melbourne furniture designer Ross Didier. “I’ve long been exploring design sensibilities that were Australian without being kitsch or clichéd – and this seemed like the perfect project.”

When the lift doors open, guests are shown through the walk-in wine cellar into either the 50-seat main dining room, or the 24-seat chef’s table area in front of Vue’s 20-strong kitchen team, who are surely blessed with the best view from any commercial kitchen in the city. In response to concepts discussed with Bennett and project architects Elenberg Fraser, Didier produced two separate table and chair designs – each creating distinctive settings that deliver different dining atmospheres to each space.

Moving on from the resource-heavy tradition of linen, Bennett was drawn to kangaroo leather as a surface for the restaurant’s dining tables. Desirable for their character (hides come with claw-scratches and bullet holes) and durability, the hides, due to their shape and small size, presented a challenge, requiring a leatherworker of patience and dedication.

Bennett approached James Roberts, a shoemaker known for bespoke kangaroo leather shoes and co-founder of menswear atelier Captains of Industry. After sourcing more than 80 tanned hides from rural Victoria, Roberts and his business partner Theo Hassett hand-upholstered Didier’s dining tables, cutting and stitching together five to 10 hides for each one. The results are one-of-a-kind tables with individual patterns and unique character. Chairs are alternated: some are backed in kangaroo leather, others in kangaroo fur.

While most eyes might rest on the city lights 55 floors below, anyone looking up will see the work of Melbourne-based installation artist Emma Lashmar. Suspended above the dining room is a collection of 90 transparent blown-glass orbs, each housing internally connected diffused light fittings. The notion, says Lashmar, was to recreate the field of tiny points of light that the city becomes when viewed from that height.

Along with a bespoke wood and glass cheese service trolley from Orio Randi of Prahran workshop Arteveneta, table centrepieces by artists Mark Douglass and Tom Samek, and art installations from Sydney artist Mikala Dwyer and US artist Joseph Kosuth, every element of the new Vue de monde was developed or customised for the project. “The goal was to create something unique – and we don’t do anything the easy way,” jokes Bennett. “This project wasn’t about buying whatever chair is new in Milan this year. Everything is done from scratch inside the kitchen and, now, outside the kitchen.”

Thinking back to that very first phone call, Lorenz Grollo is exuberant. “It has been well worth the wait. This is such a defining moment in Rialto’s regeneration.” MATTHEW HURST



HAND-UPHOLSTERED KANGAROO HIDES, ABOVE, CREATE AN INDIVIDUAL PATTERN ON EACH TABLE IN VUE DE MONDE’S MAIN DINING ROOM. SALT AND PEPPER SHAKERS FASHIONED OUT OF AUSTRALIAN ROCK AND CUTLERY RESTS FORMED FROM HAND-PAINTED PIECES OF PENFOLDS GRANGE VINES CREATE UNIQUE TABLE CENTREPIECES. BELOW: A SEQUENCE OF 90 GLASS ORBS BY MELBOURNE ARTIST EMMA LASHMAR, SUSPENDED ABOVE DINERS, REFERENCE THE POINTS OF LIGHT THAT THE CITY BECOMES WHEN VIEWED FROM THE RIALTO TOWERS’ 55-STOREY HEIGHT.



PHOTOGRAPHER: MARCEL AUCAR PRODUCER/TEXT: MATTHEW HURST