



TREE CHANGE

Nowadays, pub patrons want it all and with its new refurbishment, The Oaks is the place to get it.

STORY: LUCIE ROBSON

*The Oaks Bar & Grill
118 Military Rd, Neutral Bay*



The Oaks originally opened way back in 1885 and was bought by the Thomas family in 1975. The owners have recently spent \$4m to ensure the pub can now match the best in the industry in terms of food offerings and pub experiences. Sydney firm Paul Kelly Design was engaged to breathe new life into the classic pub's interior, retaining its beloved art deco character. Stage 1, now open to the public, encompasses a revamp of The Oaks Bar & Grill dining room, and Stage 2 will comprise a whole new space outdoors, currently under construction.

"The Oaks is a national treasure," says principal designer Paul Kelly, "And at every step of the way we were mindful of the rich history that the hotel brought to the industry." Situated as it is among upmarket restaurants and wine bars on the North Shore, Kelly was tasked with giving The Oaks a dining room that could rival both. Due to recent decades of development in the suburb, the pub found itself needing to attract younger patrons back to its rooms, as well as keep the steadfast mature crowd that has provided consistent support. So the key was to strike a balance between the old and the new.

"The visual historical links in the fitout were crucial to the acceptance of the space for the wide market that refer to the hotel as one of their own," Kelly continues. "We used a lot of references to the art deco period and the perceived market familiarity with heritage in a hospitality space, as in what the market believes is a true historical link."

COOK-YOUR-OWN EDGE

The new Bar & Grill room has the 'timeless edge' that Kelly recognised the pub needed. Design elements have a 'hand-made' feel to them — tartan carpets, timber wall cladding, ribbed leather banquette seating and a large gas fireplace are among the standout features. Part of creating a welcoming dining area was making the room less imposing by dividing it into smaller zones. In order to break up the huge room into more intimate spaces for guests, Kelly implemented glass and timber screens. "I really like the complete zone feeling that you get in the smaller spaces we've created," he says. "These spaces can really transport you to a place that is not a recreation of time gone by, but of a re-invention of a great time of quality and honesty. The firm went the extra mile with the finishing touches as well, spending time with engineers to improve the acoustics of the room.

The hotel has invested in an entirely new central kitchen which can serve up to 400 meals an hour, feeding the whole venue from the bright new menu. The dining room is where the magic happens — steak. It was back in the '70s that The Oaks introduced the concept of guests cooking their own steaks, just the way they liked it. A new addition, then, to the dining room is 'The Oaks Butcher', where an in-house butcher prepares cuts of meat for guests, who cook it themselves at a designated station or leave it to one of the chefs. It is a continuation of an Oaks tradition and a fun feature that sets the pub's restaurant apart from its competition.

ART DECO STEAK

"We used elements that the clientele can relate to," says Kelly. "We drew on our experience in the steak-based concepts we had completed previously that were for the younger markets, and then adapted those to have a historical reference (in this case, art deco) to be appealing to the existing clientele. "We also selected items that were the essence of the original space, in this case the tartan carpet, which the younger/newer markets think is quite dynamic, but it is referenced to the older customers."

WALK IN CELLAR

Wine lovers are receiving special attention at The Oaks. The pub has spent considerable time putting together a list to rival specialised wine bars in the area. These are stored in a walk-in, temperature-controlled glass atrium, accessible by guests who can then select the wine of their choice. This is a feature guaranteed to appeal to older and younger generations, says Kelly. Well-concealed drop-down screens have been installed in the bar and grill area for special television and sporting events.

SPECIAL BRANCH

Kelly had previously come across a collection of delicate botanical drawings from the 1800s and thought they would be perfect for The Oaks — little slices of Australiana decorating the walls. By a happy coincidence, the management were able to acquire the original glass plate prints from the State Library and they can now be seen in the dining room. "They are a nice talking point, and it sets the mood," says Kelly. All these features give the offerings at The Oaks a special edge, Kelly believes. "It's on the cusp between a classic pub and a restaurant," he explains. "Everything here has been done properly and done well."

RIDING THE NIGHT CRANE

The Oaks and Paul Kelly Design trusted building and construction company The Chillie Group with the upgrades. Director Graeham Wem says that the project's biggest challenges were accessing the site through the main doors on Military Road, working with night cranes and keeping the pub open to guests throughout the process. A temporary kitchen was created in the beer garden area to ensure food service could continue. "I think the design has captured the essence of The Oaks hotel everyone is familiar with, while transforming the old image with a gastro pub vibe that will attract a wide demographic," says Wem, who believes that the redesign hits the mark in terms of what patrons are currently looking for: "A new vibe, fresh spaces, good food and an excellent range of beer and wine." Stage 2 of The Oaks' revitalisation is the Garden Pavilion, what Kelly describes as an "English-styled orchid conservatory", alongside the famous oak tree in the beer garden; "it's the 'day' to The Oaks Bar & Grill's 'night'". The updated outdoor space will be open in time for the summer crowds and will add much-needed function space to the venue, providing 80 seats and a standing function capacity of 120.

"The interiors are truly stunning and this will be a welcome addition, with its 1950s links to the hotel and its completion of what the whole Oaks business will become," says Kelly.

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