

BRANCHING OUT

With the Garden Pavilion complete, The Oaks is turning over a new leaf.

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20



21

A Neutral Bay institution since 1885, The Oaks is now on to the second stage of its almighty makeover. Owned by the Thomas family since the 1970s, the work was commissioned to bring the pub up to date and in line with the sky-high public expectations for high quality food and beverage. Paul Kelly Design worked on both phases of the refurbishment.

Stage 1 consisted of a reworking of the Oaks Bar and Grill dining room and opened in mid 2013 [see Issue 54]. The new interior features timber cladding on the walls, ribbed leather banquette seating, tartan carpets, a large fireplace and a walk-in, temperature-controlled glass atrium for the new wines. Kelly's team divided the large area into zones with glass and timber screens. At the same time, the hotel invested in a much bigger kitchen, capable of plating up 400 meals in an hour.

Stage 2 is the Victorian-era-greenhouse-inspired Garden Pavilion. Last year Kelly described the future addition, then in the construction stage, as "the day to the Oaks Bar and Grill's night".

PAVILION SPACES

The Pavilion has two spaces: a dining and function area in the front and a bar in the back. The new areas add to the already-impressive function capabilities of the hotel, which boasts numerous smaller rooms on the second floor. Thanks to the extensive use of glazing, no one is denied their dose of natural light.

In the front room, a collection of exotic plants populate the zinc-clad walls, tumble carelessly from the ceiling features and occupy enclaves like giant terrariums.

Other notable features include a stately wooden bookcase on the back wall (one should be able to enjoy some reading at a garden party, after all), and aquamarine wall tiling complementing the blue of the walls. White timber-framed glass doors enhance the conservatory atmosphere, and lead to the monumental and eponymous oak in the garden.

"The interior experience is relaxed and playful," says Paul Kelly, Director of Paul Kelly Design. "The new space is adaptable to the customer's request, along with the flexibility to function as a stand-alone bar within the Oaks Hotel."

RE: LEAF

General Manager Andrew Thomas says he is pleased with the two stages of renovation, especially as it adds to the various capabilities of the venue. "We really wanted to add another experience for people at The Oaks, and this space has definitely achieved that — it used to be a kitchen and bar area with virtually no seating, and now we can comfortably fit 100 people seated or 150 people cocktail-style."

Key to the design brief was the creation of a premium function space that not only extended the existing garden area (and made the resident Oak tree even more of a focal point) but had a feminine appeal — pastels, white, glossy tiles, plants and natural light contrast with the Bar & Grill's darker, more masculine interior, which features timber and tartan.

"It was really important to us that this was a light, bright and modern space that people could enjoy for a range of different events and gatherings," says Thomas.

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GARDEN TEMPTATION

The extended and substantial investment in the entire project (around \$4m) has resulted in more guests using The Oaks in more ways. The Garden Pavilion is open every non-function day to the public, although these have been fewer and further between with a diary full of long lunches, product launches, birthdays and engagements. “We have recently booked in our first wedding reception,” says Thomas. There’s also a regular bi-monthly ‘Six States of Beer’ event happening throughout the year. In short, the new space has proved popular, Thomas explains. “People are always impressed by its fresh, verdant vibe and the feedback has been really positive — people really appreciate the detail and design in the space.”

The Oaks is now ready to take on the challenge of satisfying the modern pub customer — somebody who wants to drink and chat, but also enjoy quality food, inspired design and a variety of experiences. On the North Shore, this is being offered by an increasing number of players but with its strong heritage and forward gaze, The Oaks is sure to stand the test of time. [venue](#)

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