

***Shannon Bennett's New York: A Personal Guide to the City's Best* by Shannon Bennett, Scott Murray and Friends (Miegunyah Press, 2010)**

The chef of Australia's most expensive restaurant, Vue de monde, is back with a Manhattan follow-up to his first culinary guide (*Shannon Bennett's Paris*, reviewed in the last edition of *Transnational Literature*). His views are supplemented by those of his 'friends with opinions', who include noted television chefs Luke Mangan, Matt Moran, Tobie Puttock and Neil Perry – if none of these names is familiar to you, you might want to consider choosing another guidebook – plus a clutch of lesser knowns and unknowns who share Bennett's enthusiasm for New York's finest. Eating and accommodation, that is: don't waste your time searching within for advice on museums, art galleries, sightseeing and shopping. As Bennett says in his Preface: 'I hope it will be a book that you can walk along the street with and not be labelled as a tourist with a travel book but as a foodie heading to their next story-filled destination.' Personally, I think anyone wandering Manhattan streets clutching a book with a picture of the Chrysler Building and 'New York' in large letters on the cover is going to be labelled a tourist. Not that there's anything wrong with that, Shannon.

The guide is divided into Downtown, Midtown, Uptown and Outer Boroughs, and the last district need not detain you long. At least Brooklyn has a handful of Michelin-starred restaurants, but I'm not sure anyone's going to be schlepping all the way to Hoboken, NJ, to eat at the four ordinary eating places reviewed here. Not when there are restaurants in Manhattan like the Michelin three-starred Per Se run by that icon of American cuisine, Thomas Keller, and 'universally agreed' to be the finest restaurant in New York. It is, of course, staggeringly difficult to get a reservation, but the desserts are 'amazing', the chicken is 'amazing', the food generally is 'amazing', the kitchen is 'amazing', in fact, the entire experience is 'amazing'. So say Shannon, Neil and Bryan.

Thank goodness for Shannon's best mate, the filmmaker Scott Murray who, this time round, is given star billing and a separate preface in which to introduce himself. Like Bennett, he has a passion for three-star restaurants and an even longer track record of eating in them, but he's a tougher critic. Where Bennett will put up with rudeness and a bad table if the food is amazing, such defects would ruin the dining experience for Murray or, at the very least, make him exceedingly grumpy.

Murray did not have a good experience at Per Se. His emailed reservation and confirmation had vanished into cyberspace, the hostess treated him with disdain and the staff like someone who knew he didn't have a reservation and was trying to bluff his way in. 'I have never been made to feel worse in a restaurant anywhere in the world,' he sniffs. He went back to his hotel room and ate a tin of mixed nuts which, even at mini-bar prices, must have cost less than the \$275 he would have spent on Per Se's 3-course dinner menu, so a bit of cheer there. None of the staff contacted him afterwards, as promised, and when he finally rang the restaurant three days later with proof of his reservation there was no apology. The moral is **never** leave the print-out of your restaurant confirmation back in your hotel room, but apart from that, is there any point in including this anecdote? After all, seven other diners wrote rapturous reports of Per Se.

Shannon Bennett's New York. Ruth Starke.
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But who wants to read three hundred and eighty pages of rapturous reports? Bring on Murray the Grump. The operations manager at Vue de monde describes the fare at the Michelin three-star Jean Georges as ‘brilliantly executed’, but in Murray’s opinion the lunch ‘doesn’t deserve five out of ten’, despite the fact that the restaurant is regarded as ‘one of New York’s shining [*sic*] stars’. Another famous place is Katz’s Delicatessen; Matt Moran reminds us that the fake orgasm scene in *When Harry Met Sally* was shot here, but Murray’s eggs were ‘beyond dry’, the coffee was ‘nearly flavourless’ and the toast ‘toppled distressingly in the hand’. (I’m sure there’s a sexual joke there.) The editor-in-chief of *starchefs.com* raves about Ed’s Lobster Bar, but Murray finds the food ‘average’: his claw is overcooked, the salad ‘just okay’ and the lobster ravioli ‘totally drowned in sauce’. Chef Wylie Dufresne is ‘at the forefront of molecular gastronomy’ in the US; Bennett finds the cuisine at WD-50 ‘bold’ and ‘creative’, and some of the dishes ‘sensational’. Murray’s bad mood begins as he navigates the ‘rusting slum’ that is the Lower East Side (‘the poorer suburbs of Moscow look better than this’) and increases as he discovers that the restaurant is equally dark and tightly-packed, with basic glassware and cheap cutlery. It gets worse: he can’t understand the thick accents of the Jamaican waiters, the *amuse bouche* has the texture of sawdust, his Shrimp Canelloni is ‘not thrilling in any way’; Egg Ravioli looks great but tastes ‘just like under-seasoned everyday egg’; the duck breast is ‘close to flavourless’ and the cous cous ‘bland’; his lychee sorbet contains celery, for heaven’s sake, and his lemongrass mousse is piped onto the plate ‘like a slithering snake of toothpaste’. To employ a culinary metaphor, Murray’s contributions are often the squeeze of lemon juice that cuts across the fat.

It’s a relief to know he did have some memorable dining experiences. Sho Shaun Hergatt is a ‘stunning’ restaurant with a ‘stunning’ array of wine and ‘stunning’ *amuses bouche* where Murray is served ‘one of the finest dishes of my life’. Alain Ducasse’s Benoit is rated higher than its Paris counterpart (‘the most divine cheese puffs I have ever tasted’ ... the avocado is ‘the best I had ever tasted’ ... the salmon is ‘one of the greatest fish dishes I have ever eaten’), and all for a luncheon prix fixe of \$US25. Lunch at Benoit Paris cost 38€ (\$54) and that was over two years ago.

Prices are the good news for Australian travellers; the strong Aussie dollar makes this the best time for yonks to visit the USA. Michelin-starred restaurants and five-star hotels like The Carlyle (‘I don’t believe there is a better hotel anywhere in the world’, praises hard-to-please Murray) and the Waldorf-Astoria suddenly look affordable. The latter’s base room price is listed in the guide as \$499, but I got an internet rate of \$379 for a Queen Deluxe, and that’s currently AUS\$358. Rooms at The Marcel at Gramercy, a four-star, very chic boutique hotel, are listed as starting at \$359: on the internet, that fell to \$279, or AUS\$264. Bennett strongly advises travellers to do this web research for the best accommodation deals. The loudest applause in the guide is given to a two-star Michelin restaurant called Corton. Bennett is ‘gob-smacked’, Harry the Hairdresser rates it ‘the best meal experience I had in New York’, and Matt Moran calls the seven-course degustation menu at \$135 ‘fantastic’. It’s a bargain.

But it’s not all Michelin-starred dining. There are plenty of recommendations for bistros, steakhouses, cafes and burger joints, and Bennett throws in some of his own recipes. The most puzzling recommendation is from Paula and Patrick Gorman,

who recommend Buddakan's Fate Cocktail, 'originally designed for Kate Winslet's character in *The Reader*'. (That would be the illiterate Nazi-concentration camp murderer then? Cheers.) The guide includes plenty of photographs but, disappointingly, most of them are stock photographs of standard Manhattan sights, not the hotels and restaurants under review.

Ruth Starke