



Left: Sushil Aryal at Miss Pearl Bar, Melbourne, in front of *Midnight Marauders* by Alina Zorkina, photo © Carmen Zammit, image courtesy The Fresh Collective

Right: Menu items from MOD. Dining, image courtesy The Fresh Collective

Yes, chef!

Sushil Aryal, chef behind the MOD. Dining menu at the Art Gallery, speaks to *Look* about his favourite flavours, Nepalese culture and food tailored to gallery-goers.

INTERVIEW



Imagine you've spent a few hours at the Art Gallery taking in the art on show. 'Hanger' is setting in, so you wander to the calm and elegant MOD. Dining space on lower level 1 of Naala Badu to relax with a meal overlooking the cool caerulean harbour. Opening the menu you'll notice ingredients like king salmon, duck, barramundi, lychee, miso caramel and mango. Things are starting to look up.

MOD. Dining highlights the boldness of Asian flavours thanks to chef Sushil Aryal. Arriving in Australia at age 18 after travelling from his home country of Nepal with very little English, Aryal found himself at Brown Sugar Cafe at Bondi Beach. Under the tutelage of chef Neil Gottheiner, Aryal's cooking skills blossomed and a career full of travel, delectable food and imagination began.

Aryal returns to Nepal every two years to visit family, his culture forming the core of his cooking ethos. He explains, 'Food and being hospitable is a big part of our culture. For us Nepalese, there are a lot of religious events and festivals, and we use food to celebrate them.' Aryal adds, 'I was taught not to disrespect food, and I carry that with me. When I work in the kitchen I try not to have any waste and to respect the ingredients.'

Asian flavours are his passion and Aryal has travelled extensively – to Japan, Vietnam, Thailand and more – in order to understand the possibilities of Asian fusion. 'Asian food is what I like to eat and prepare. I just love the flavours and the styles of cooking,' he says.

Aryal was also largely raised as a vegetarian, with 'meat being something we'd eat maybe once a month', he explains. So, you can bet the vegetarian options on the MOD. menu are strong. Aryal personally favours the vegetarian claypot rice with shitake mushrooms, tofu and eggplant. Another of his top picks, the crispy eggplant, is an absolute winner with its contrast of creaminess and crunch.

Approaching the menu for MOD. Dining, Aryal had some different challenges to the usual restaurant format. 'We did need to consider a certain time limit,' he explains. 'People are not coming for a six-hour lunch, so we needed to create something fun to eat with the family and friends you visit with – more of a banquet style.' Indeed, the MOD. menu gives you plenty of options to suit your schedule, from snacks to small plates, kids' options, mains, sides, desserts, light breakfasts for early-risers and banquets for those with a little more time to spare. There's even a vegan banquet.

An appreciator of fine art himself, Aryal comments, 'The flavours at MOD. are quite punchy, which I feel is a bit like contemporary art. It's a good match.' I ask whether he has any artistic inclinations and he laughs. 'In painting and drawing I'm not that great, you know, but that's what I do on the food side. Food is all about imagination.' Although we're chatting digitally, Aryal's creativity and passion for creating nourishing food shines through.

As our meeting comes to a close, Aryal mentions an upcoming seasonal menu change which is sure to bring him fresh inspiration and flavours. With so many new shows to see in Naala Badu from June, from the beauty of Yolŋu art to key contemporary works from the Kaldor Collection, a taste infusion at MOD. will sprinkle some zest into your visit.

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Emma McLean, *Look* deputy editor



MOD. Dining is located on lower level 1 of Naala Badu. It is open 10am–4pm daily and until 9pm on Wednesday evenings. To view the menu, scan the QR code.