

# The Sydney Morning Herald

Good Weekend

## Just six seats a night: What's driving the teeny-weeny restaurant trend?

As restaurants consolidate or die, a charming trend is emerging at the other end of the spectrum: teeny-tiny eateries that trade on intimacy and quality – for the sake of their owners as much as their diners.

By Dani Valent

APRIL 6, 2024



Greasy Zoes owner Zoe Birch: "If you want to make a million dollars, opening an eight-seat restaurant isn't the way to go." BONNIE SAVAGE

This story is part of the April 6 edition of Good Weekend. [See all 11 stories.](#)



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**C**hef Zoe Birch is thinking about corn. Not the peeled and plastic-wrapped cobs you or I might see in the local supermarket, nor the week-old corn that most restaurant chefs would order from their produce wholesaler. But the corn that's been planted especially for her by her friend Warren McKimmie at Sugarloaf Farm. "I know Warren has planted it because I asked him to," says the chef and co-owner of two-hat restaurant Greasy Zoes, which has just eight seats and is open only four times a week. "It's a pain in the bum for him because it eats up a lot of his garden area. It takes four months to grow and he makes hardly any money from it. You only get four cobs off one stalk, rats love it, caterpillars love it, it's a labour of love."

During those long weeks she ponders what she might do with the crop that is pushing skywards and slowly – hopefully – ripening into sweet, golden cobs. She's even been known to check on it: wandering through the corn rows with hands outstretched to tickle the streaming silk. After all, Sugarloaf, a 30-hectare fifth-generation farm at Strathewen, is only 15 minutes' drive from her restaurant in Hurstbridge, a hilly outer suburb of Melbourne.

While the sweetcorn is growing, there's time to consider how she'll serve it in the cosy timber-and-brick restaurant she runs with her partner Lachlan Gardner and exactly zero staff. "Maybe I'll make a maize tortilla with fresh corn custard and an amazing sustainable prawn that comes from South Australia," she riffs. The corn dish will be one of eight or so courses that she serves to 32 diners a week as part of a set menu that costs \$190. Everyone eats the same food here, with allowance for dietary requirements. Bookings are released at 9am on the first of each month for the month following. They are swiftly snapped up.

Birch and Gardner opened Greasy Zoes in 2017 as a personal solution to an industry-wide conundrum. How do you have a satisfying career in hospitality and some semblance of a life as well? "It was a lifestyle decision," Birch says. "We'd worked in big, medium, small restaurants. We were looking at getting out because it's difficult to be a human being and work in hospitality as it's long nights, long hours, stress. We wanted to start a family, too. With both of us working in hospo, it seemed a bit impossible."

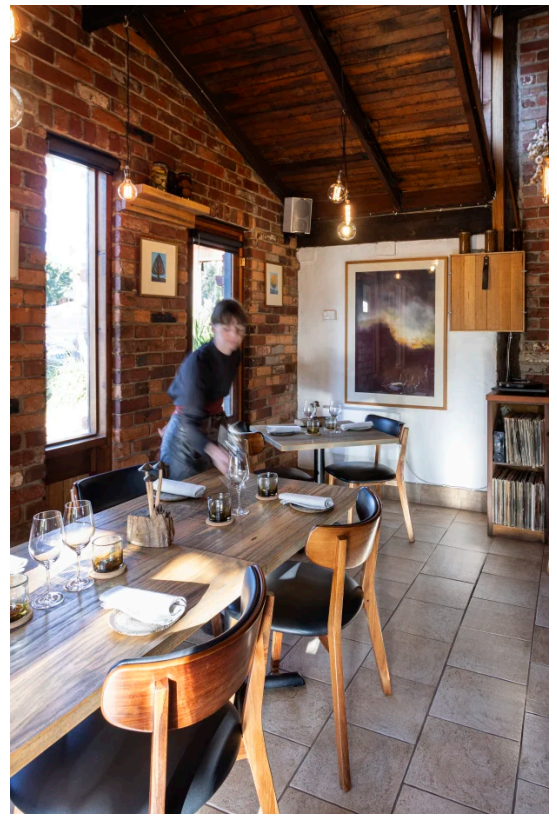
They landed on tiny. "We decided to do something that was more about quality than quantity," Birch says. "We wanted to do a fine dining restaurant that wasn't open all the time, and because it's small scale, we could support small producers around us: we don't need heaps of produce. We use three farms and these guys are our friends. We have strong bonds."

McKimmie even takes Greasy Zoes' food scraps and composts them. When Birch inspects the corn, she might see a calcium-rich oyster shell poking up from the ground. "Oh that's ours, I'll think," she says. "It's close, it's community, it's low footprint." The connection with diners is strong, too. "It's personal when you cook for so few people. You can have a conversation. They can ask questions. You can talk to them before they leave. We love it."

When Greasy Zoes opened in 2017, it was a curiosity: how could a restaurant be so tiny and stay afloat? But over the past few years, Zoes has had company. Chae is a six-seat Korean restaurant in Cockatoo, east of Melbourne, which sees thousands of people entering a monthly ballot for one of 18 seats a week. There's Restaurant Ka in Sydney's Darlinghurst, where ex-Sepia chef Zac Ng feeds just 10 diners at a time, and Le Salle Dining by Bar Chaplin in nearby Surry Hills, which usually seats 10 to 14 guests but will open especially for just two diners, if they are regulars. In Melbourne's Footscray, Hansol Lee welcomes four people per sitting to Matsu, his pint-sized Japanese restaurant. Pop-up Chameshi Zenka serves two or four diners in West Melbourne. These are all tiny businesses, owned by solo operators or hands-on couples, with no or very few staff. All of their menus are set: you get what you're given.

At the same time, it's getting harder and harder to run a regular independent restaurant, the kind of 40- to 100-seat place that has long been standard in every Sydney or Melbourne shopping strip. Owner-operators are crunched on one side by ever-increasing labour, produce and running costs, and on the other by a cost-of-living crisis that keeps some mortgage-beholden customers at home and stops those that do venture out from ordering the sides and desserts and second bottles of wine that used to tip break-even into a profit margin. "It's never been easy to run a restaurant but it's never been this hard," says Harry Tsindos, owner of the 39-year-old Tsindos in Melbourne.

While indie restaurateurs lament empty seats and open every envelope with fresh dread, multirestaurant groups are expanding apace. The behemoth is Merivale, which runs more than 90 venues across Sydney, regional NSW and Victoria. Of course they employ chefs and waiters but a workforce of 4000-plus also includes architects, branding experts, delivery drivers, human resources executives and procurement administrators.



Greasy Zoes is in a rustic shopping complex under looming gumtrees. BONNIE SAVAGE



Zac Ng with customers at Restaurant Ka. RHETT WYMAN

Victorian company Darling Group has 11 cafes, restaurants and function venues and employs about 500 people. "Hospitality isn't easy at any level but with more venues, you do have more



market power in terms of negotiating prices and locking in fixed pricing based on volumes,” says the group’s executive chef, Ash Hicks. “We also use a lot of online systems for reporting and ordering so we’ve always got live data of costs of goods and labour costs. These systems cost money, so it’s not a cheap exercise, but they do pay us back in visibility and rigour.” Larger companies are also able to offer career progression and sweeteners such as free meals or discounts at sister restaurants. “The groups attract all the local, experienced staff,” says Harry Tsindos. “Family restaurants are disappearing.”

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## ***Spots at Matsu sell out faster than a Taylor Swift concert.***

Or, in some cases, they’re going extremely small. Tiny restaurants are able to create a more controlled environment with greater certainty around costs and income. Fixed menus mean chefs can keep their purchasing much tighter: the food they buy will be eaten, rather than sit (and go to waste) in a groaning coolroom that supports a large menu. Prepaid dining experiences or hefty credit card deposits mean the impact of no-shows and cancellations is mitigated: in any restaurant, diners who don’t turn up can be the difference between making a loss or profit on any given night. Reducing or eliminating the need for staff trims wages and hefty on-costs such as superannuation, WorkCover and payroll tax and also takes heat out of the fine art of rostering and coping with absences due to holidays or unexpected calamities. Restaurants are complicated machines with dozens of moving parts: reducing their size and scope can bring calm and control back to the operation.

What’s it like for customers? Is it still fun to dine out without the buzz of a busy restaurant or choice about what you eat? And will you ever find out anyhow, when it’s so hard to snare a booking at some of these places? Chae’s waitlist once ballooned to 10,000 people. Spots at Matsu sell out faster than a Taylor Swift concert. Before new four-seater Emerald City even opened in Healesville, hundreds of hopefuls had registered for a slot.



Owner and chef of the four-seat Matsu, Hansol Lee. EDDIE JIM

Let's say you do secure a reservation, the arrival experience can be a little edgy. Because tiny restaurants often insert themselves into unlikely low-rent locations they can be hard to find. Chae is in the owners' home, which is hidden down an extremely steep driveway on an obscure bend in a country road. Greasy Zoes is in a rustic shopping complex under looming gumtrees. Matsu is behind a narrow doorway squished between graffitied roller doors leading to a tight stairway. Emerald City is at the back of a whisky distillery in the Yarra Valley: you push through heavy green curtains to locate it. Restaurant Ka is behind a mirrored glass frontage that looks like nothing really, maybe a place you'd pick up some orthotics you'd ordered.

Once you're in though, an unlikely arrival can make the warmth and intimacy of these experiences even more compelling and beguiling. On a recent Saturday night, chef Zac Ng is intent and quiet during dinner service at Ka, which he opened in the spring of 2022. He's keeping an eye on his 10 customers or, more accurately, he's looking at their plates on the counter in front of him, each of them empty but for swipes of black purée. These inky swirls are the remains of his signature calamari dish. "I get very fresh, very good southern calamari from a supplier who knows the importance of quality," explains Ng, who was Sepia's first employee when it opened in 2009 and stayed for the restaurant's duration: he sent out the three-hatted restaurant's very last dessert during its final service in December 2017.

"The Restaurant Ka menu changes all the time, except for this one dish," he says. "We finely slice the calamari into long noodle shapes and quickly sauté it in a very hot pan with a fragrant shallot oil. We make a sauce using shallots, garlic, spices and squid ink so it is black. The purée goes on the plate and the squid noodles cover the purée. We sprinkle burnt shallot powder on top to create a smoky sensation." He loves seeing people eat their way to the bottom of the dish. "Every night, people enjoy it and I enjoy watching them. You can imagine the black purée on the bottom, all the plates look different depending on how they eat the sauce." When they're

almost finished, Ng swoops in with a little something extra. “I make a bao, a sort of hybrid between a brioche and milk bun, and present it to guests to wipe clean the sauce. People are so surprised. That appreciation makes everything worth it.”



Zac Ng's signature calamari dish at Restaurant Ka. WOLTER PEETERS

What is “everything” though? “I work from 10am to midnight every day,” says Ng. “It’s harder than I thought it would be. The tasks involved in serving 10 people are the same as for 50 or 100.” Ng employs a couple of chefs, but no waiting staff. “I do everything from cleaning, bookings, emails, creating the wine list and cocktails, folding napkins and receiving complaints.” He also has to go to the supermarket. “Some suppliers require a minimum order and I can’t meet it,” he says. “I want to order a drum of oil, a 20-kilogram bag of flour or sugar but I can’t. I have to go buy it myself and that all takes time.” Ng barely pays himself. “My wife looks at the bank balance at the end of the week and complains, ‘oh, is that it?’ But I can pay the bills, people enjoy it; this is my dream.”

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**T**he idea of a tiny restaurant didn’t come out of nowhere. Most of these bijoux restaurateurs allude to omakase, a Japanese style of dining which translates as “I leave it up to you.” It involves a progression of sushi courses crafted by one chef who serves them directly to a handful of diners sitting on the other side of a kitchen counter. Omakase restaurants usually seat fewer than 10 diners, with owner-chefs often working solo: they go to the fish market, cook the rice, prepare the sauces, cut the fish, warm the hand towels, serve the fish and clean up afterwards. “For many of the chefs internationally who are starting small places today, the reference would come from Japan,” says Kenneth Nars, the Helsinki-based founder of the global *World of Mouth* restaurant guide and, for the past 17 years, academy chair and vice-chair for The World’s 50 Best Restaurants annual hit list. “There’s omakase, but also tempura and even ramen and soba noodle places where the tradition is of striving towards perfection, with one master doing it for just a handful of people.” He cautions that such a tight,



interactive concept is extraordinarily difficult. “You have to have vision, you have to have skills and be a good chef,” he says. “But more than that, it’s about personality. You need a particular sort of human intelligence to be able to run that game, and that’s where I think that it’s not for everybody.”



Kenneth Nars publishes the World of Mouth guide.

Patrick Dang, chef and co-owner of Le Salle, spent a year in Taiwan, which is steeped in Japanese culture. “I walked into an omakase place and there’s a 69-year-old guy, he’s there by himself day in, day out. I asked myself, why can’t I do this with Western food?” Le Salle is his response, run with his wife Ederlyn Oloresisimo, previously a waiter at Melbourne’s high-flying Vue de Monde. “It’s very hard to survive in our industry with our labour laws and high costings,” says Dang, “so I asked my wife if we should do something small and intimate, where we can control the quality and don’t need to rely on any staff.” They offer four courses for \$88, serving French-inspired food such as sea urchin with crayfish hollandaise and squab with foie gras and truffle. “I will always be cooking for you,” he says. “My wife will always be greeting and serving you.”

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***‘People are searching for new ways of combining work and life quality.’***

Kenneth Nars

Zac Ng was inspired by omakase, too. “Omakase is almost a holy word,” he says. “I want to be one of the chefs that takes this chef-counter model and brings in other influences: Chinese,

Australian. I want to flex my cooking journey and background and make the industry more fun and diverse.” He agrees with Kenneth Nars: being on show is not easy. “It’s the ultimate challenge for a chef,” he says. “You have to be extremely presentable and organised. Your performance enhances the whole experience.”

Nars has seen an increasing number of small restaurants in his travels. “You can look at it as a step in the evolution of the restaurant, a sort of emancipation of the concept,” he says. “People are searching for new ways of combining work and life quality. Some chefs, bakers and even bartenders choose to do it in an agile way where they try to get rid of the bureaucracy of hiring people. At the same time, they are looking to offer care and attention to a customer. They love the handcraft and the contact: it’s something many professionals are looking for.” Pandemic pivots are a factor, too. “Many things were rethought during COVID,” says Nars. “That flexibility of questioning how you can operate, be it pop-ups, takeaways, cooking from home, arranging dinner clubs, I think that mindset has stayed.”

In fact, there’s a good example right near his Helsinki office. “It’s called Canvas Canteen and it’s run by a young couple with about 15 seats and they just do lunch,” he says. The menu is conceived daily, guided by this question: “What would we eat at home today?” There are no bookings, no takeaway and a market-inspired lunch, maybe fish stew with saffron plus bread, lemon-poppysseed cake and coffee or tea for less than \$40. “It’s always packed, surprising, so fun and the conversation and engagement is always there,” says Nars. “Then at four o’clock they go and get their kids from kindergarten. All the chefs in town are asking, ‘Wow, how could they do it?’ And they say, ‘We just did it, this is what we want to do.’”

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## *‘When I see the customer smile, that’s my reward.’*

Matsu’s Hansol Lee

Opening a four-seat restaurant was exactly what Hansol Lee wanted to do but after a year at Matsu, the Korean-born chef isn’t sure how long he can continue. “It’s very hard, harder than I thought it was going to be,” he says. Without quite deciding to, he’s taken on all the roles that at a big player, such as Merivale, would be covered by many people – architect, branding, delivery, HR, procurement – but it’s just him and profit is scant. “The balance between life and work is one per cent life and 99 per cent work,” says Lee.

Matsu is a kaiseki restaurant, a Japanese style of tasting menu which has a formal, almost ceremonial, structure. When I ate here, I was greeted by the chef but also by a cloud of dry ice that drifted away to reveal a live lobster, waving his antennae in greeting or – more realistically – lament: we ate him later. Kaiseki is avowedly seasonal, so Lee’s \$235 menu is always in flux, requiring constant, avid, creative attention. He told me a year ago that serving just four diners would allow him to touch every dish and ensure quality. Now he’s thinking of expanding: his model is taxing on both mind and body. “I think I can do it like this for a couple of years, but if I want to work for a long time, I will need to change these conditions,” he says. An eight-seat restaurant would allow him to employ a manager to share the load. “I wouldn’t make more money, but I would share the responsibility and pressure,” he says. Day to day, service to service, he is still happy. “I love this journey,” he says. “When I see the customer smile, that’s my reward. People keep coming and making a booking. There is demand so I can plan the future. I am going to figure it out. This is my homework. I am very lucky.”





Chef Patrick Dang usually limits numbers to 14 at Le Salle Dining.

Money is not the motivator at any of these tiny restaurants. Le Salle is booked out every night for a four-course \$88 menu with the option of supplementary dishes. “If you calculate how many hours I work, it probably doesn’t make sense,” says Patrick Dang. “But if I’m standing in a kitchen for 80 hours a week it has to be meaningful to me. I don’t see this as a job – it’s my life.” The restaurant has to pay its way, but it hasn’t been created as an earner. “Some guests have been five times already in the four months we’ve been open,” says Dang. “That return customer is priceless to me. Numbers are important but they don’t write the story of your life.”

In West Melbourne, Manami Okada serves two or four people for two sittings on Friday and Saturday nights at Chameshi Zenka, which pops up at 279, her son Kantaro’s cafe. Chameshi is Japanese claypot rice. Okada and her late husband ran seven Japanese restaurants in Auckland over a period of 20 years before moving to Japan in 2018. “My husband always dreamt his next restaurant would be dedicated to chameshi,” says Okada. “After he passed in 2021, I wanted to fulfil his dream.” The feeling is more important than the finance, for Okada. “I used to run fast-paced restaurants with more than 60 seats,” she says. “Now it feels like I can create a more personal and slow-paced dinner that anyone can enjoy. It feels like I am creating time for people to be able to connect.”

Jung Eun Chae and her husband Yoora Yoon are a little further along their tiny restaurant journey, having opened Chae as a two-seater in 2019 in their Brunswick apartment, and moving in 2022 to their current home-restaurant in Cockatoo. Diners sit at a handsome but humble timber bench that wraps around the kitchen, where they are served dishes based on ferments that can be seen around the property, maturing slowly over the years. On the verandah, soy sauce inches towards resolution in large ceramic urns called *onggi*. Persimmon vinegar is racked on shelves in the lounge room. One bedroom is given over to large bottles of a vegetable enzyme that’s used as a sweetener.

Chae worked in large fine dining restaurants in Melbourne until an ankle injury sustained in a traffic accident forced her to take a break. An old dream of owning her own cosy little restaurant resurfaced. “Looking back, I think I was inspired by a documentary I watched during the early days of my chef career,” she says. “The film showed an elderly lady in Hong Kong running a restaurant that catered to just a few customers. Her passion for her craft struck a chord with me deeply.”

During her convalescence, Chae reconnected with the Korean food traditions she had grown up with, such as making kimchi, and it’s this that she wants to showcase for Australian diners. “Operating from a tiny, home-based setup helps to save on traditional business expenses like rent and wages,” she says. “This is especially significant for our Korean restaurant, where we make traditional ferments that require space and often take years to prepare. Unlike traditional food businesses that may struggle without immediate revenue, we can patiently wait until our ferments are ready to share with our guests.” Yoon recently quit his job as a fashion designer to work on Chae full time and he’s helped reshape it as a platform, not just a restaurant. “Our goal as a brand is to offer a holistic culinary experience, including dining, workshops, retail and online content,” says Chae.



Jung Eun Chae prepares dishes for six.  
CHIP MOONEY

It’s a vision with an eye on longevity: running a restaurant, even a six-seater, is physically taxing but these other business streams will allow the couple to continue.

Education is central to Chae’s model but it’s often lost when chefs retreat from traditional kitchen hierarchies to go it alone. Chef Joel Alderdice resigned from his head chef role at hatted 60-seat winery restaurant TarraWarra to take on tiny Emerald City, where he will interact with guests as he serves them a series of snacks. As much as he’s looking forward to this new challenge, he does have pangs about leaving the brigade behind. “I love the camaraderie and the team,” he says. “I had an apprentice at TarraWarra and that was really fulfilling.”

Hospitality is so stretched these days that it’s hard to find time to train people. “Even if someone wanted to work for us for free, I couldn’t do it because it would take time away from my day-to-day operation,” says Patrick Dang. “To pass knowledge on takes time.” But that crunch leads to a general deskilling of the industry. “When I use celeriac, I dry the trim, then I’ll reconstitute it like a porridge and use it with braised chestnut and beef cheek,” says Dang. “You can only do that when you’re on your own. With a big brigade, it’s hard to pass on that message. The skill level is not where it used to be.” There’s an impact for diners as many menus become bland and same-same. “Everything is generic,” says Dang. “The industry is evolving around big players, big groups; everyone is serving burrata and kingfish.”

Back at Greasy Zoes, the corn is in, juicy and sweet, with speckled yellow and white kernels bursting with creamy starch. Birch and Gardner will eat a few cobs with their two young daughters – “it’s so fresh you don’t even need to cook it” – but most of it goes onto the menu. “I

use the whole vegetable,” she says. “There’s a sense of responsibility because he planted it for me and it’s taken all these months to grow.”

Birch makes a stock with the skin and the cob. She juices the kernels and warms the liquid in a bowl over a boiling pot, letting it tick away until it thickens naturally, thanks to all that sun-ripened starch. The fibrous leftovers of the juicing process are ground into cornflour and baked in a biscuit that she serves with milk jam at the end of the meal. “Something as simple as a cob of corn straight from a farm, it’s just magic,” she says.

For Birch, connection, creative satisfaction and freedom are the motivators: they just closed the restaurant for the weekend to attend a family camp with their daughter’s prep year. “If you want to make a million dollars, opening an eight-seat restaurant isn’t the way to go,” she says. “But we are bohemians, we live frugally anyway. We do Greasy Zoes because we want to have fun and it makes us happy. I get up in the morning and I really want to go. It’s full-on and we’re busy all the time but we’re in our 30s so we are enjoying it because I assume one day we’ll be old and have nothing to do. Why not embrace the craziness?”

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