



Above left: Mecca Bah. Above right: Sloaney Pony. Right: Lamaro's.

Hot August nights

Donna Coutts takes a table fireside for some of Melbourne's best winter dining.

Melbourne is a beautiful city in winter. The leafless trees in the formal, English-style gardens ringing the city contrast starkly against frequent clear, crisp blue skies. On overcast days, the grey of the sky fits the bluestone palette of the buildings and streets. Even the winter dress of passers-by seems styled to suit the colours of the city.

Not that it's *that* cold here. (Expect winter daytime temperatures around 14°C and nights down to about 6°C.) It just seems chilly when you're comparing Melbourne with, say, Cairns in tropical north Queensland, or Broome in the sweltering north of Western Australia. No need for elegant woollen coats there.

No need in warmer climates for a glass of robust red wine, a melt-in-your-mouth braise

and a rich, chocolatey dessert. No need at all for food and drink like that in front of a toasty open fire. Thank goodness for Melbourne weather, then.

If an evening by an open fire in a world-class restaurant sounds to you like a wonderful way to experience this beautiful city in winter, read on. There's a wealth of warming winter ideas here. And that's just for starters.

Fire by the bay

The Baths

251 The Esplanade, Brighton.

Tel: 9539 7000.

www.middlebrightonbaths.com.au

New name, new chef and owner and new food for a Melbourne bayside favourite this winter.

The Baths, formerly known as the Middle Brighton Baths, sit right on Port Phillip Bay.

Watch the ships and yachts go by whatever the weather; cosy up by the fire for a pre-diner drink in winter. Chef and owner Paul Raynor concentrates on local seasonal produce for his European-inspired menu.

Hot in the Middle East

Mecca Bah

55a New Quay Promenade, Docklands.

Tel: 9642 1300.

www.meccabah.com.au

Arrive early to watch the setting sun compete for attention with the flames of the open fire. And with a no-reservation policy, early is the best way to be. It's a spectacular spot here overhanging the water. Moorish interior, modern Middle Eastern food and the warmth of the fire are enough to spice up anyone's winter evening.

For ski bunnies, in St Kilda

Veludo

175 Acland Street, St Kilda.

Tel: 9534 4456. www.veludo.com.au

One local reviewer described Veludo's massive granite fireplace as giving this wine bar an

French flame

Libertine

500 Victoria Street, North Melbourne.

Tel: 9329 5228.

www.libertinedining.com.au

Libertine has it all - French Provincial-style



impressing with high-quality, familiar European brasserie-style food. Melbourne's *Herald Sun* restaurant reviewer Stephen Downes was so impressed by the whole package (very impressed by the comfortable chairs and gorgeous décor - the restaurant space is sumptuous) he gave it 17/20 in its first few weeks. And he's a hard marker.

Sure-fire bar

Lamaro's

273 Cecil Street, South Melbourne.

Tel: 9690 3737.

www.lamaros.com.au

This has to be one of Melbourne's prettiest locations for a pub: across the road from a park and surrounded by grand Victorian terraces. But it's not the location that has made this renovated pub one of Melbourne's favourite bistros. Melbourne daily newspaper the *Herald Sun* named it best pub brasserie in 2008. But don't get the wrong idea. A pub in Melbourne in 2009 is as likely to house a top restaurant as it is to be a neighbourhood watering hole. The food is refined contemporary, with influences from Asia and Italy, which doesn't seem like an odd match at all when you have one of these dishes in front of you. And if you're feeling the cold, warm up by the hearth in the bar, in one of two private dining rooms or in the restaurant.

Rural fire brigade

Lake House

King Street, Daylesford.

Tel: 5348 3329.

www.lakehouse.com.au

Lake House often tops the list as Victoria's best regional restaurant. The modern regional food is exquisite, the wine list has won every award there is and so have the staff.

Though it's two hours' drive north-west of Melbourne, there's more than enough to do if you head off up the highway for a day or two in the area. You can stay at Lake House. And you'll eat every meal you can at Lake House. And you'll warm yourself by the fire at Lake House. But in your spare time you can check out the antique shops, cafés, restaurants, galleries and world-famous spas around Daylesford and Hepburn Springs.

après-ski Hugh Hefner vibe. Whatever gets you hopping. If posing by the hearth makes you hungry, there's always a lavish tapas platter or a wagyu burger with free-range egg and hand-cut chips. Well-priced, well-made food at this St Kilda favourite.

Flames trees

Botanical

169 Domain Road, South Yarra.

Tel: 9820 7888. www.thebotanical.com.au

The Botanical has long been at the top of Melbourne's fine-dining tree. The restaurant and bar is beautiful to look at, the food is gorgeous and the setting by the Royal Botanic Gardens one of the city's best. What more could you want on a cold winter's evening? An open fire in the bar, of course.

food, romantic French décor, sexy French music. And to top it off, something no restaurant in France can manage - an inner-Melbourne location. They celebrate winter with gusto here. Warm up by the fire and tuck into \$25 cassoulet on Wednesday nights. Bring your own wine on Thursday nights. Or go the whole hog and order roast suckling pig for 10 served à la Normande (you must book one week ahead).

Slick flickering

Sloaney Pony

1 Crockford Street, Port Melbourne.

Tel: 9645 2503.

www.sloaneypony.com

The old Fountain Inn hotel metamorphosed into Sloaney Pony last year, immediately