



PICTURE ROB DUNCAN

**YOU GOTTA LOVE MARGARET RIVER.** Not just for the obvious wine, tourism, surfing thing, but because it has become Australia's most culinary wine region. Victoria's Yarra Valley probably comes close, but for sheer numbers of great restaurants, Margaret River punches above its weight. Vasse Felix, Leeuwin, Knee Deep, Must Winebar, Xanadu, Voyager Estate — all of these restaurants would be top of the pile in Perth, let alone Margaret River.

One restaurant which has, on a few occasions, almost made it into the Vasse Felix/Leeuwin Estate league is Clairault. It's a consistency thing. Over the years, we've been more than a few times and on some visits it was pretty ordinary and a little confused. On other visits it had really hit its straps. Luckily for us, on the occasion of this review, it was on form.

Much of the current finesse coming from the kitchen is down to 34-year-old head chef Jake Drachenberg, who's been cooking around the region for many years at Cape Lodge, Caves House and Flutes.

Drachenberg's food is clean, modern, in a vernacular way, but revved up with good technique and smooth presentation.

Pity the meet-and-greet wasn't as smooth: we were directed to our table with a pointed finger and an "it's over there".

Twice-cooked duckling leg (pictured), braised black fungus, masterstock, young ginger, baby coriander, \$18, is straight out of the modern Asian play book, although the clarity and freshness of the masterstock flavours set it apart. The steamed and deep fried twice-cooked technique rendered the meat fudgy and with a good crinkly crust.

Soy caramelised scallops, red miso, tempura eggplant, shiso and green onion salad, \$20, was similarly a mod-Asian dish in the Kylie Kwong style:

**Clairault**

3277 Caves Road, Wilyabrup (Margaret River)  
(08) 9755 6655

**OPEN** Lunch, Thursday-Monday

**PRICE RANGE**

Entree.....	\$16-\$20
Mains.....	\$34-\$38
Set lunch.....	\$50 for two courses
Dessert.....	\$14-\$15

**THE BUZZ** Terrific, simple, modern Asian food cooked and plated with elegance. Beautiful grounds. Views over the vineyard. Estate range wines are the must-haves.

Score: 14.5/20

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1-9: Unacceptable. 9-11: Patchy. 12-13: Getting there.  
14: Recommended. 15-16: Very good. 17: Memorable.  
18-19: Outstanding. 20: Perfection.

big flavours, a nice salty tang and some perky salad greens. It was a good combo of technique and texture, particularly the addition of tempura vegetables.

For mains, an aromatic red curry of baby eggplant, green papaya, coconut rice, hot and sour macadamia and bean salad, \$34, was cut from the same mould, and again executed with precision. It was a vegetarian dish of distinction.

One suspects Drachenberg is cooking to his strengths. He seems to have an affinity with the modern Asian style. None of his dishes are particularly inventive, but cherry picking techniques and ideas from other chefs and paring them back into well-formed dishes of manageable simplicity is

something we could have a little more of, frankly. (There's nothing worse than the country chef who thinks he's the next Neil Perry and insists on being utterly "original" despite not having the palate or the talent to pull off his duck liver croquebouche with spun sauterne sugar and pork scratching timbale).

And he doesn't ignore dessert: lemon curd tart, lime leaf parfait, candied citrus, \$14, rocks the room.

Clairault is owned by the Martin family, dad Bill, mum Ena, and their three adult children. The Martins are a likeable and popular couple who've spent millions on the winery and its grounds. It has arguably the prettiest park-like grounds in the region.

The wines, too, have been subject to some significant capital expenditure and have improved greatly over the past decade. The estate range, including estate cabernet and estate chardonnay, is the flagship.

Service — apart from the meet-and-greet blunder — is mostly fine and certainly friendly.

Clairault is a poster boy for the Margaret River lifestyle: a great way to while away a Sunday afternoon drinking good wine and eating good food under the gum trees. **WW**

