

COUNTDOWN TO CHRISTMAS

'Tis the season to flee

Forget the stress of cooking, leave the mess behind and enjoy a festive lunch out of town, writes **David Sutherland.**



CHRIS Talihmanidis has served food at his famous Beacon Point restaurant near Apollo Bay every Christmas Day since it opened 32 years ago. But four years ago the impressive sequence was almost interrupted. In May 2003, the restaurant perched on the clifftop above Skenes Creek was destroyed by fire, and subsequent rebuilding took longer than anticipated. Christmas Day was looming, and 83 people had booked for lunch.

"We had a whole team of builders and even with us pitching in we only finished the last touches at 4am on Christmas morning," says Talihmanidis. "But we managed to open the restaurant for Christmas, and it was a beautiful day."

Many of Talihmanidis' customers have been relying on the restaurant with its breathtaking view for Christmas lunch for a decade or more.

"We greet them at the door with a glass of champagne or a nice glass of wine," says Talihmanidis, "and we have a chat and catch-up. It's a day for hospitality, and we are very hospitable up here."

With a long and celebrated career behind the stoves, including an early stint at Florentino in Melbourne in the 1960s, Talihmanidis' cooking is known far beyond this little neck of the woods. He relies heavily on quality produce, and has used the same suppliers for decades. On Christmas Day at Chris' this year, the menu (fixed price \$120 a person) will be much the same as on the previous 32, incorporating such traditional fare as turkey, ham, plum pudding, summer fruits and seafood. Cured Tasmanian ocean trout, local crayfish teamed with housemade ducks' egg pasta and fresh fish of the day with roasted red pepper and caper salsa, doff the cap to tradition while still allowing

Talihmanidis some creativity.

For the rest of us, Christmas Day at home can be such a palaver that the idea of escaping the city and heading into regional Victoria for a meal is enormously attractive. Forget the stresses of cooking and disappear for the day. Be treated to top-notch food in a welcoming setting, with a drive through pleasant countryside as a bonus. No dishes to do. Who could argue with that?

Many regional restaurants are run by small teams, often comprising husband and wife with a few extra casual staff, and choose to close their doors on the big day. Understandably, they prefer to spend the day with their families than work. This gives them at least one day off before the summer holiday season truly kicks in and late February looms as the next possible time for a break.

But Gary Cooper, head chef

Clockwise from left: Balgownie Estate, the getaway vehicle, Villa Gusto, Joseph's restaurant at the Mansion Hotel, Werribee, Eleanore's at Chateau Yering, Queenscliff Hotel.

and co-owner of Bella Vedere at Badger's Brook Vineyard, between Coldstream and Healesville, takes a different view. Cooper and co-owner Tim Sawyer have opened their Italian-influenced restaurant — awarded a hat in the past two editions of the *Age Good Food Guide* — each Christmas since it opened three years ago, and Cooper believes it behoves a restaurant to be open on a day when people want to eat, drink and celebrate.

"I sort of consider it my duty to open on Christmas Day," he says.

"A lot of people have come to rely on it, both here and in my stints elsewhere in the valley, and they really appreciate you staying open and putting on a good day for them. And besides, it's part and parcel of being in this industry isn't it? When other people are resting or celebrating, that's when the hospitality industry rocks. You may not make much money on the

CITY SNAPSHOT — CHRISTMAS DAY

- Vue de Monde, \$350 a person, including a degustation style menu with matching wines, Normanby Chambers, 430 Little Collins Street, 96913888, www.vuedemonde.com.au.
- The Press Club, \$139, four-course set menu, highlight: turkey on a rotisserie, 72 Flinders Street,



96633134, www.transporthotel.com.au.

- 96779677, www.thepressclub.com.au.
- Taxi Dining Room, \$240 a head, level 1, Transport Building, corner Flinders and Swanston streets, Federation Square,

Docklands restaurants

- Fish Seafood Grill & Rotisserie, \$79 a head, 96400686.
- Saganaki, \$95 a head, 96060008.
- Bellissimo, \$75 a head, 93266636.
- BlueFire, \$99 a head, 96708008.
- Hot Chocolate, \$49 a head, 96421818.
- Yum Cha Dragon, \$69 a head, 93296868.
- Steakhouse, \$89 a head, Pier 35 Marina, 96460606; New Quay, Docklands, 96400808.

- Explorer Christmas Day Cruise, \$120 a head, 92850000, www.rivers.net.au.

Southgate restaurants

- Egusto, river level, a la carte, 96909819.
- Walter's Wine Bar, upper level, \$120 a head, 96909211.
- La Camera, mid-level, from \$70 a head, 96993600.

www.southgate-melbourne.com.au



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