

# The West Australian

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## Fine dining in Bangkok

**Caroline Berdon** The West Australian  
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In February 2007, 40 people sat down to dinner 65 floors above a steamy and frenzied Bangkok. They enjoyed a 12-course meal prepared by six three-Michelin-starred chefs. And they paid around \$30,000 each for the privilege.

Certainly, they were well fed. There was a crème brulee of French foie gras, Beluga caviar, oysters from the French Belon river, a tarte fine of scallops and black truffles, Brittany lobster, pigeon en croute, even Dom Perignon sorbet - each course coming with its own wine. And for dessert the group tucked into imperial gingerbread pyramid with caramel and salted butter ice-cream.

The guests were made up of valued clients; the money, of course, went to charity. It was all about the show. Mezzaluna, a modern European restaurant spectacularly perched on top of Lebua's State Tower hotel, was out to prove that Bangkok - like Hong Kong, Tokyo and Singapore before it - had at last joined the Asian foodie renaissance.

Exactly four years on and Mezzaluna is being relaunched under head chefs Thomas and Mathias Suhring, twins from Berlin who have both worked across Europe under Michelin-starred chefs. Mezzaluna is now Thailand's most expensive restaurant, but compared to the 2007 gala dinner, prices are thankfully more affordable: a three-course dinner will set you back around \$130; a six-course tasting menu around \$160, with both menus changing daily.

Our dinner is a luscious tour of fine global produce. We enjoy king crab with Osetra caviar (a buttery caviar from the Caspian Sea widely considered to be the world's best); mackerel from Japan in a beautiful tomato broth with bright vegetables; then lobster from Nova Scotia.

Then it's the meat courses: duck from the famous Ernest Soulard duck farm in the French region of Vendee - presented under a thick layer of black winter truffle and wood hedgehog

(the mushroom, not the animal), followed by an incredibly succulent piece of Rhone lamb.

For dessert, we lust over cake made from aruagani chocolate (which is 72 per cent cacao), raspberry coulis and a delightful dollop of creamy goats' cheese.

But before dessert, comes a little surprise: a pre-dessert of yoghurt and plum with tarragon cream. The pre-dessert is one of the ideas Lebua's executive chef, the charming and excitable Frank Yannick Ziegler from Alsace, hopes will help earn Mezzaluna Thailand's first Michelin star.

"The pre-dessert will work with the saltiness to the sweetness, which is pretty cool," says Ziegler, who worked in the three-starred Ledoyen in Paris before arriving at Lebua just over a year ago. "It's working with tarragon, it's working with saffron, it's working with fennel, it's working with many flavours like this for desert, which is not common. And these flavours match together very, very well." Mezzaluna is one of a number of high-end restaurants in the Thai capital gaining worldwide recognition.

Australian-born David Thompson opened authentic Thai restaurant Nahm in Bangkok last year, to rave reviews. And following the success of one-starred Kiin Kiin in Copenhagen, Sra Bua by Kiin Kiin has opened in Bangkok's Siam Kempinski Hotel serving modern Thai fare.

There are also Lebua's other acclaimed restaurants: Breeze, which offers a menu of contemporary Asian cuisine on the 51st and 52nd floors of the hotel, and Sirocco on the 63rd floor - the world's highest al fresco restaurant, which literally fans out into the air 200m above street level, a design that earned the Mediterranean restaurant a place in design magazines across the world when it first opened in 2003. But expensive international cuisine is still a novelty in Bangkok.

Sam Leong, one of Singapore's most famous Chinese chefs who is a consultant for Breeze, worked for five years in Bangkok 20 years ago. The Thai capital was a very different place back then, he says.

"You could only find local ingredients so it was challenging for foreign chefs coming to Bangkok. But now you can bring in so many good ingredients. If you compare to Paris, New York and Tokyo, Bangkok is catching up."

Ziegler hopes the changes are enough to earn Thailand its own Michelin Guide one day soon.

"Coming to Asia and already having worked in Hong Kong and Macau [where there are Michelin Guides], now I'm in Bangkok and they don't have it and I'm a little bit sad because I know the quality of the food we're serving," he says. "What I like about Bangkok is people

are passionate about food, they have a lot of skill and they are very kind, very polite ... It would be great for the people of Thailand and Bangkok to be better known as a food destination too."

Of course, Bangkok has been serving up good food for decades. Anyone who has visited the city will remember bare-bones grills along the roadside serving up dishes such as marinated squid and barbecued pork belly, and Thai woman chopping up green papaya with gusto to mix with peanuts, chillies and lime.

The variety of street food on offer is vast - from curries to stir-fries, salads to soups - and most of it is made from fantastic local produce and prepared by very fine cooks. It's possible to spend a weekend in Bangkok and not visit a single restaurant.

In fact, Thailand is a nation that eats on the streets. Many Thais have no cooking skills at all.

This is why Mezzaluna has to offer something new, says Deepak Ohri, CEO of Lebua hotels and resorts. "When Thais go out to dine (at a restaurant), they don't go out to have Thai food." Ziegler says Mezzaluna, which sources its food from 15 countries, has no qualms about bringing in the most expensive ingredient from the other side of the world if it's the best.

"Here we bring octopus once a week from the Mediterranean - it's the very best. And there is a huge difference between wild and farm-raised," he says. "Here we have wild caviar - there's a huge difference in the eggs and flavour. We also use wild salmon, I will bring wild white Scottish salmon next week - nobody has it in town, it's very expensive. For me it's boring to just have Norwegian salmon."

As I dine at Mezzaluna, I try not to think about the number of air miles that have been racked up to provide me this dinner. It would be obscene.

Interestingly, Lebua is on the verge of opening a restaurant in central Sydney (once it finds the right location) that will take the exact opposite approach: all the produce served - including the wine - must come from a five-kilometre radius.

"Sydney is very competitive; it has better food to offer than Hong Kong and Tokyo," says Ohri. "Sydney will be our international platform and from there we will move to Europe and the US."

But for now, it's all about excellence and exuberance in Bangkok.

For information and to make a booking at Sra Bua by Kiin Kiin, email [sales.siambangkok@kempinski.com](mailto:sales.siambangkok@kempinski.com) ; phone (+66) 2162 9000 or visit [www.kempinski.com](http://www.kempinski.com)

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\*The writer was a guest of Lebua Hotels and Resorts \_.

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