

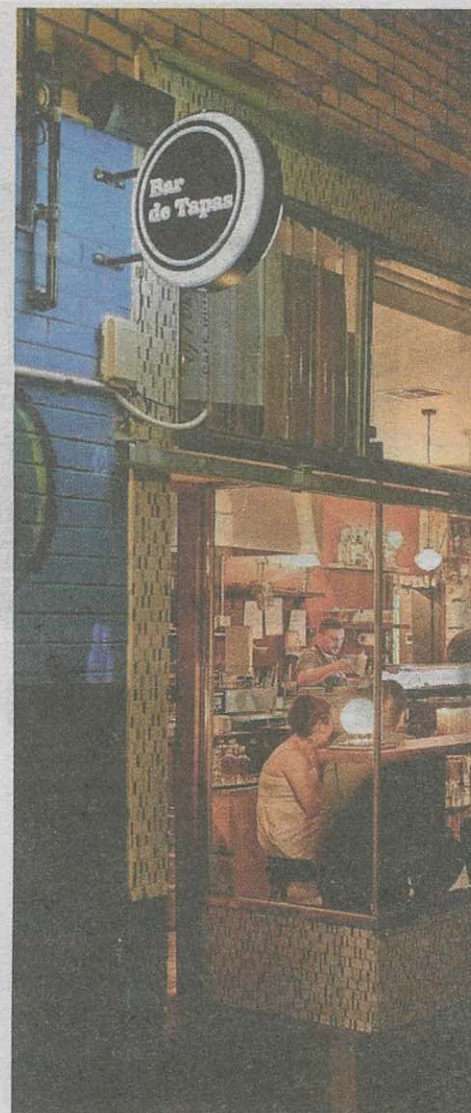


# Cover story



# 40 under \$40

Good Food's favourite hidden gems, hot new eateries and old faithfuls.



There was one overriding feeling I had crisscrossing Melbourne to eat at these 40 restaurants. From the eastern hills to the western sprawl, the northern byways to the southern waters, the word that kept surfacing was "lucky".

How fortunate we are to have accessible bounty in every corner of this huge city. How special that people put their all on the line to share their culture and story. And how diverse the food and the flavours – it's an endless adventure.

This collection celebrates restaurants where one person can eat for \$40 or less. That might mean two courses, a hearty share in a huge banquet, or a lovely grab-bag of snacks. In a time when costs are rising for eaters as well as businesses, it can be tricky to balance affordability and viability: it's a pleasure to salute those who manage it.

For me, food is always an opportunity to connect. With this definitively non-exhaustive (but somewhat deliciously exhausting!) guide to 40 affordable eats, we celebrate the boundless possibilities to engage in something that can be profound as well as prosaic: the daily delight of dining.

## MELBOURNE CBD

### Bowltiful

Do you want your Lanzhou-style noodles super-thin (0.5mm), super-wide (30mm) or somewhere in between? Select a size then watch through the kitchen window as they're being stretched by hand and cooked to order. The noodles are traditionally served with rich braised beef and a clear, fragrant broth. Excellent sides include shredded potato salad and spicy chicken. There's counter seating

along a wall with flip-back partitions, ideal for solos or (ca) noodling couples. Bonus: open until 2am.

● 249 Swanston Street, Melbourne, [bowltiful.com.au](http://bowltiful.com.au)

### Cambodia's Kitchen

Brother and sister Ivanra and Linna Hun are devoted to getting their favourite Cambodian street food into Melburnians' mouths. Slow-simmered pork broth underpins the rich and comforting signature soup brimming with pork offal, sliced pork and noodles.

That same sparkling broth accompanies the excellent fried chicken, served with pickles and house-made fish sauce. The setting is low-key, but there's true depth to the flavours and the intention.

● 175 Russell Street, Melbourne, [mryum.com/cambodias-kitchen](http://mryum.com/cambodias-kitchen)

### Cathedral Coffee

The sandwich-board sign depicts a coffee cup, but there's more going on at this bijou pitstop in an art deco arcade. By day, it's batch brew, baguettes and cheeky aperitivi. After office hours, it's more about lo-fi wine and elegant bar bites. There might be a crudo, baked scallops, a seasonal salad, a cheese board. It's an easy matter to turn snacks into a meal, especially when the wine offering – natural, naturally – is so alluring. Bonus: Cathedral Cabinet – an art gallery in a display cupboard – is here, too.

● 37 Swanston Street, Melbourne, [instagram.com/cmelbourne](https://www.instagram.com/cmelbourne)

### Mamasita

When it opened in 2010, Mamasita was a Mexican marvel, but it's had ups and downs over the years. The kitchen is on song right now under Colombian-born chef Miguel Guerrero. Climb the narrow stairway and grab a perch to try his vegan mushroom tostaditas with cashew cream, the delightfully drippy braised ox-tongue tacos, and charred mussels with house-made Clamato sauce and carrot chips. Bonus: the whole menu is gluten-free.

● Level 1, 11 Collins Street, Melbourne, [mamasita.com.au](http://mamasita.com.au)

### Miznon

No one considered cauliflower to be an attention-seeking starlet until Miznon brought its succulent whole cauli to Melbourne in 2017. But there are other dishes to treasure at this anarchic Mediterranean street-food hangout. The "bag of green beans" is a snack-happy celebration of veg, and the mashed-potato-stuffed schnitzel "malka" is a ridiculously indulgent joy. Book in for Friday evening's regular Shabbat party, where the value is amped further with communal singing.

● 59 Hardware Lane, Melbourne, [miznonaustralia.com](http://miznonaustralia.com)

### Pick Prik

The Bourke Street hill has become a thrilling Thai Town. Options include the ever-reinventing Thai Tide, bustling hot pot joint Nana Thai, and pint-sized Pick Prik, which is carved into a corner of barbecue palace Heng. Issan street eats include marinated raw fish, green papaya

salads with extras (I love the raw crab), and chilli-sprinkled fruit salads piled into tall cups for spearing with skewers. Shareable platters offer keen value, the pace is speedy and everything zings with flavour. There's often a queue: join the line snaking into the Citadines hotel corridor.

● Shop 2, 131 Bourke Street, Melbourne, [instagram.com/pickprik-melbourne](https://www.instagram.com/pickprik-melbourne)

### Xinjiang Lamian

Victor Zhang shares secret recipes from his uncle in Urumqi, crafting Uighur specialities from China's north-west Xinjiang province in a humble Melbourne restaurant. You'll want the signature noodles, hand-stretched to an unwieldy metre of bouncy chewiness – there's no shame in asking for scissors – tossed with lamb, cumin and chives. Tiger salad is a riot of cucumber tumbled with coriander, house-made chilli oil and sesame dressing, and lamb skewers – a Xinjiang classic – are brushed with a cumin and fennel spice mix as they're grilled over charcoal.

● 255 Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, [xinjianglamian.com](http://xinjianglamian.com)

### EAST Dale La Pau

Conceived in lockdown to assuage both boredom and homesickness, Dale La Pau specialises in Minang-style rendang from West Sumatra: slow-cooked, dark and dry, and prepared with astonishing variety. As well as rendang in various beef cuts and styles (shredded, fatty,

soupy, offal-y), there are versions made with jackfruit, prawn and chicken. At lunch, the best deal is the nasi rames (rice-and-extras) plate; at dinner, there's a rendang platter for two as well as endless satay, salad and curry possibilities.

● 255 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, [dalelapau.com](http://dalelapau.com)

### Dooboo

You're here for the namesake dooboo ("tofu"), slippery-soft and jiggly and scooped into a spicy jjigae (stew). This hot pot alone would easily make a meal, but it also comes with banchan (accompanying snacks) and rice served in an iron vessel. Scoop out the rice until you get to the baked-on base, then add hot water from a supplied kettle to make a thin congee to complete your dining experience. The flavours are traditionally Korean but the setting is avowedly modern, with QR ordering, robot food delivery and a sleek shopping centre setting.

● G-004, The Glen, 235 Springvale Road, Glen Waverley, [dooboo.com.au](http://dooboo.com.au)

### Little Drop of Poison

It's easy to build a meal from Basque-style pintxos, Spanish tapas, Mexican tacos and

Latin American bites at this cosy but free-thinking bar that brings inner-city poise to the city fringe. You might luck onto empanadas, tacos or a generous seafood-studded paella. There's always plenty for vegans and gluten-avoiders.

● 937B Main Road, Eltham, [littledropofpoison.com.au](http://littledropofpoison.com.au)

