

## A NIGHT ON THE NOODLES

“Excuse me, would two of these seats be free?” he says in a hurry. He sounds agitated. It’s 5.30pm. On a Friday. Not the time of day or week for agitation, thank you. We’re outdoors in Hyde Park<sup>1</sup>, towards the northern end. The noodle markets are filling fast. I’m reserving several white plastic chairs and a matching table. The furniture setting also includes the slimy entrails of a seafood Pad Thai left by earlier occupants.

“No. Sorry, they’re not free; I’m waiting for friends,” I reply with a smile. His hand, which was clasping the back of one of *my* chairs, reluctantly lets go. He (wearing a grey business suit, *sans* tie) and his female companion (in a charcoal pant suit) don’t move. Instead, they stand more upright – her on tippy toes – and, while holding bowls of food, swivel their heads from side to side like someone looking both ways before crossing a busy road. They’re presumably scouring the crowd for any spare seats. I take a sip of Coopers Sparkling Ale<sup>2</sup> and return to my engrossing book.

“But we’ll only be ten minutes,” he pleads. His hand is back clasping the top of one of *my* reserved chairs.

“And my friends are due any minute,” I counter. “There were quite a few spare tables over in the other section not so long ago. You could try there.”<sup>3</sup>

She had already begun to move off. He lingered. After that he left.

*Night on the noodles - Tip # 1 – If you can’t get there early, send a ‘scout’ to reserve tables and seats no later than 5.30pm, especially towards the end of the week if the weather looks favourable.*

Soothing music filters through the October air from speakers suspended in trees somewhere. Children chase birds; parents chase children. A

<sup>1</sup> So named after the original Hyde Park in London in 1810 by the colony's governor. He dedicated the area for the "recreation and amusement of the inhabitants of the town and a field of exercises for the troops". Hyde Park occupies several city blocks on the eastern fringe of the central business district.

<sup>2</sup> Only sponsor’s beverages are available. Beer options are limited to Coopers Sparkling Ale and Coopers Premium Light. Vodka by Belvedere. And Brown Bros is the wine supplier: their Tempranillo is particularly tasty. Benefiting from the Cambrian soil and warm moderate climate at their Heathcote Vineyard (Vic), the 2004 vintage is a bright crimson red colour with aromas of red berries and plums, cassis and integrated fruit and oak. It carries plenty of weight and spice but with little tannic richness thus making for very supple drinking now or even in five years time. Perfect quaffing material for meaty noodle dishes eaten outdoors.

<sup>3</sup> There are actually more than 2000 chairs available. These are spread evenly between two sections, separated by the wide walking path leading from Elizabeth Street to the Archibald Fountain. Each section has about fifteen food stalls and one drinks bar.

small boy cries after tripping over the exposed and tortured roots of a Moreton Bay Fig. A constant stream of office workers pour in; their week done. They loosen ties and buttons and ‘unwind’. The well-prepared spread picnic blankets or plastic sheets on the grass, kick off shoes and lounge around like tweenagers at a slumber party. The really well prepared unpack glassware. There’s a nutty scent of satay as someone walks by with a plate piled high. A pack of school students from nearby Sydney Grammar amble listlessly along a path; more than half have iPod earbuds inserted. Some chomp on spring rolls.

Lots of people talk on their mobiles. A nearby ‘scout’ (see tip #1) takes a call. She listens and then says: “Can you see the group of tall, skinny palm trees in the corner?” I imagine the caller said something like: “Which bloody corner?”

Scout: “Just past the huge plastic inflated lights hanging from a tree. They change colours. They’re quite pretty. We’re under the blue one. No, hang on, it’s going green now.” The scout soon stands, presumably hoping to catch sight of the caller, who meanwhile probably looked around and noticed plastic inflated lights hanging off most low-lying branches on most trees, not just the tree “in the corner”.

“Close to the row of noodle places near the road that comes down from Macquarie Street towards Dee Jays,” says the scout.

I can see where she is and even that instruction baffles me.

She climbs onto her chair and continues: “I’m standing on my chair holding up a wine glass. Can you see me?” She looks peculiarly regal, with her glass held aloft, like an Antipodean Statue of Liberty. Now she starts scanning the crowd by rotating on the spot using small dolly steps, still in that same pose. Then things get really interesting because at that moment a Café del Mar type tune springs to life and I’m reminded of one of those childlike jewelry boxes where a ballerina sprouts, arm pointing up, and starts pirouetting to music when the lid opens and I hope for the scout’s sake – as well as the hapless caller – that they ‘connect’ real soon before calamity and possible injury befall my stately performer.<sup>4</sup>

As if the 3G airwaves were not congested enough with hundreds of arrivals phoning incumbents for directions, my mobile rings. It’s Anita, my partner, calling. “We’re running late. Sorry hon. Jessica is in tears. She needed to ‘vent’ then got really upset. The others have left, so it will just be you and me for noodles. Really sorry.”

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<sup>4</sup> The attempt at being a beacon fails. The scout eventually climbed down and headed off into the throng hoping to home in on her friend using the phone as a makeshift tracking device. Note: perhaps the GPS capability of many of today’s phones could be utilised for locating lost colleagues in a crowd?

“That’s okay. Um, but isn’t Jessica *your* manager and a senior partner?”

“Yes. Long story. Tell you later.”

“So how long will you be?”

“About half an hour.”

“No problem. I have my beer and a book.”

A distant clanging din starts up. Are they cymbals and drums and chanting? Surely not a Hare Krishna procession? The shrieking cacophony approaches, unseen, but certainly heard, as if someone is slowly turning up the volume. A prancing Chinese dragon with accompanying musicians. These are Asian noodle markets after all. Must be a dozen or more in the entourage. They make quite a noise causing ibises and pigeons to scatter. Several children take fright at the strange sight while others follow the dragon like mice behind the Pied Piper.

“Excuse me.”

I look up from my book. Again. Actually, I’ve hardly read; there is so much going on to observe, to be entertained by. “Are these chairs free by any chance?” The voice belongs to an American father. He can’t be older than twenty five. Clean cut, right down to the tucked-in polo shirt.

Buzz-cut hair. Military man? He’s pushing a stroller. His tanned wife, who looks even younger, and wearing three-quarter pants, an Abercrombie singlet top and Converse shoes, is carrying the stroller’s intended occupant.

“Actually, yes they are free. I was reserving them for friends, who I just found out aren’t coming. So they’re yours.”

“Oh, thank you very much,” they say in a chorus of relief and gratitude. They unpack bags, plastic food containers, drinks, a camera case, give the table top a clean with baby wipes and settle in. That’s organised. He is carrying two plastic containers of noodles – piled one on top of the other - and carefully extricates these to the cleaned table through the harness of his North Face day pack. They discuss alcohol options and ask me where the bar is.

**Night on the noodles - Tip # 2 –**  
*Avoid sitting at tables directly in front of food stalls. As unwieldy queues build, so your personal ‘space’ lessens. Soon your table is surrounded by impatient diners complaining constantly that the queue hardly moves. If you don’t mind people standing and staring in very close proximity while you’re eating and drinking, then disregard this tip.*

Pointing to the Cargo Bar, I say: “Over under that red sign that says ‘Cargo Bar.’”

Noticing my almost-empty beer, he asks: “Can I get you another?”

“Ah, well, yes, thanks, if you don’t mind.” Before I can retrieve my wallet, he’s says:

“Oh please, it’s the least we can do. What is it?”

How could I object? “Coopers Sparkling Ale, thanks.” In his absence, she continues arranging their goods and chattels, begins rehydrating and feeding the child before slumping back in the plastic chair with an almighty sigh and a backhand swipe of her brow. “Tough day?” I say.

“We haven’t stopped,” she says in a slow American West Coast drawl. “We did a full-day harbour cruise, including the zoo, and were on our way back to the hotel,” gesturing in the direction of the Sheraton on the Park, “when we were reminded of these noodle markets. I said to Gary, that’s my husband, we should check them out and maybe have dinner if we could find a table ... And thankfully we did.”

“You’re lucky all right. Tables at this time, especially on a Friday, are hard to come by.”

“But what a fantastic concept. The concierge was telling us about these markets; apparently only on for a few weeks of the year?”

“Yes,” I confirm. “They’re one of the highlights of Good Food Month. Happens every October. And with daylight saving, it kind of marks the unofficial start of spring in Sydney.”

“We’re from California, near San Diego actually. My husband is stationed there. Ain’t nothing like this back home,” she says. “Taco Bell is as exotic as it gets for us. But when we walked past the food ‘tents’ just now we saw things we’d never seen before. And it’s so cheap. But just to be able to wander in here after work, just hang out for a while, what a fabulous event. I bet you come here most nights?”

“Well, not every night, but certainly two or three times during the few weeks it’s held.” I tell her about the other special ‘foodie’ events, the Let’s Do Lunch bargains, the Sydney Beer Festival, the Italian Street Fiesta, the photo and cooking competitions. “It’s become quite a culinary event,” I say.

Gary’s back with drinks. He’s bought two of everything. That’s military foresight for you.

“Sorry I took so long,” he says. “There’s this amazing group of female dancers, not sure where in Asia they’re from, performing on a small stage in the middle of the crowd over there.”

**Night on the noodles – Tip # 3**  
*Tables near a sectioned-off area in front of the Cargo Bar have front row seats for the exotic female Thai dance troupe as they sway and swirl at regular intervals during the night.*

They offer me some of the food they’ve already bought, but I decline. I politely query what it is.

“It came from over there, near Banana Blossom. The sign said ‘SpanThai’”. Seemed a weird mix, so we

thought we’d give it a try.”

Now, Australia has long been renowned for its fusion of different food styles, particularly where East meets West, or ‘surf crashes into turf’, but I confessed to the Americans, that even SpanThai defied, perhaps defiled, our progressive epicurean reputation. What passed as SpanThai was actually prepared in a giant paella dish, measuring about a metre across. It contained remnants of prawns and mussels, perhaps fish pieces and the odd squid tentacle, plus saffron-flavoured rice. That’s the ‘Span’ bit. But this version had congealed noodles too and what looked like coriander sprigs. I guess that’s the ‘Thai’? But why?

Nearby, a man lights a cigarette. So too his companions. They’re in heaven. No longer forced by legislation to gather in small support groups on footpaths outside pubs or in dingy lift shafts, they can puff away at the night noodle markets just like old times. The park is their ashtray.

The park is also an outdoor cinema. An old black and white Japanese movie, with occasional subtitles, is showing on a rather small screen. Strung up at the end of a row of food stalls, it resembles a bed sheet hanging out to dry. Many homes would have a plasma TV bigger than this feeble effort. Volume was mute.

“Yes, it is a bit random,” confirmed one of the attendants stationed in the official sponsor’s marquee. “I’ve only worked a few shifts and it’s been playing both nights, and usually twice. Gets to the end and starts again.”

The temperature drops as the sky turns dusky purple. Two female Scandinavian tourists<sup>5</sup> use beach towels as shawls across their shoulders.

A couple of mixed race and aged in their early 20s spend an agonisingly long time diplomatically trying to decide between Squidilicious or Yummy Himalayan Tummy.

“I can’t eat shellfish,” she says.

“I don’t think squid is shellfish.”

“Yes it is; it’s not a crustacean, it’s a mollusc. Still shellfish.”

“Oh really,” he says graciously. “What about Turkish Gozleme instead?”

“I don’t mind, does it have meat in it? What do you feel like?”

**Night on the noodles - Tip # 4**

There are about 35 food stalls, most serving a variation of Asian noodles. Regular renowned restaurants, like Banana Blossom, Sailors Thai and Phat Boys are represented. There are also curry houses, Japanese sushi as well as numerous seafood outlets. The one rare non-noodle option is Poffertjes, dispensing mini-Dutch pancakes.

Just as the American family bid farewell and retreat into the dark, Anita (remember, she’s the one I’ve been waiting for) finally arrives.

“I’m so sorry it’s taken me ages to get here.”

“No need to apologise, I’ve been thoroughly entertained in the seventy

minutes you’ve kept me waiting. How on earth did you find me?”

“Your directions were perfect: towards the David Jones corner under the hanging coloured lights in front of East Ocean foods.”

I’m impressed with her bearings. Anita once got ‘lost’ jogging in Centennial Park and had to ask a ranger for directions to the Clovelly Road exit.

“What have you been doing all this time?” she asks.

“Oh, reading a bit, chatting to those guys who’ve just left and generally watching all sorts of people ease into the weekend. I’ve even been taking notes.”

“You’re always taking notes; what for this time?”

“Maybe the travel assignment for my non-fiction class?”

“Travel?” she exclaims. “Your office is in Martin Place; that’s only a few blocks away. You call that travel?”

“It’s not always about the journey.”

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<sup>5</sup> General indicators of Scandinavian-type tourists include; blonde hair, evidence of excessive sun exposure, in possession of beer; speaking in that Nordic nasal way; bandanas bearing a Swedish flag or copious amounts of yellow and blue zinc cream on their face. Our two qualified on four counts.

“Ah huh.” she says. “What angle you going to take? What’s your working title?”

“Well, I haven’t quite decided on an angle yet. But as for a title, how does ‘A night on the noodles’ sound?”

She ponders that for a moment before saying: “A little bit Marx brothers and a little bit boring.” Then, looking around at the line of food stalls behind us, now lit by Chinese lanterns looping along the row of roofs, she says: “Hey, what’s SpanThai?”

“Don’t ask!”