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On the bright side

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Good from the get-go ... X74 cafe in Coogee. Photo: Fiona Morris

Our waiter welcomes us, asks if we'll be having wine with lunch and nods sympathetically when we reply in the affirmative, in unison, with a somewhat unseemly level of enthusiasm. My lunch buddy and I feel a bit jaggd.

We're experiencing first-world problems for which a first division Lotto win would be the perfect solution but we're going to have to settle for the perfect salve instead: wine.

Our waiter touches his fingertips to his temples - as if tuning in to oenologists who have passed over to the other side - and declares he can see a Hugel pinot blanc in my future. A lovely lunch wine, apparently. Sure enough, a few minutes later, a glass of the delicate Alsatian white is by my side, condensing attractively on its stem.

We liked X74 from the get-go. It's a licensed cafe by day and a restaurant by night, and combines the best of both worlds. It's relaxed and comfortable, with the feel of a local, but the service is a cut above and the food - well, there's a former Catalina chef in the kitchen, and it shows.

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We sit at a long banquette, one table away from the semi-open kitchen at the back - you can see the heads and shoulders of the kitchen staff as they work but not their hands. As my lunch buddy notes, the layout is reminiscent of an old-style fish and chippie, but there the resemblance ends. X74 is all class - immaculate, decorated in fashionable shades of grey, with blackboard menus, plenty of gleaming stainless steel and a long line of on-trend Xavier Pauchard Tolix chairs. The room is a good size and

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it's sleek without being alienating.

I like a short menu. Like many busy adults, I've got more than enough decisions to make away from the dining table. At X74, there are just nine lunch items from which to choose and a compact wine list to match: six whites, six reds, a sparkly and a rose'. There are beers, too, but they hold no interest for us today.

We're still faffing about who is going to eat what when our psychic waiter returns to the table. He gets it right again by suggesting we share. We order the linguine with steamed vongole and chilli, and the grilled barramundi with a radicchio salad.

The pasta is laced with a fresh lemon sauce and a good sting of chilli. It's intense without being cloying and a perfect foil for the fat vongole. All conversation - by which I really mean complaining - ceases in favour of discreet noises of appreciation.

The radicchio salad that accompanies a small fillet of barramundi is a standout. The pleasing bitterness of the radicchio is toned down but not overpowered by olive oil, slivers of crunchy shallot and some top-drawer parmesan cheese that's so finely grated I can't see it, only taste it.

Dishes destined for other tables pass by while we're eating. The tagliatelle with lamb ragu and the elegant steak sandwiches that come packed between two long slices of artisan sourdough look particularly tempting.

We opt for a second glass of wine and coffees - rich, smooth piccolos - instead of dessert and contemplate staying until closing time. Alas, those first-world problems are calling.

Note: X74 plans to extend the number of evening openings as the weather warms.

**Menu**

Rustic modern Australian.

**Value**

Lunch mains, \$16-\$20.

**Recommended dishes**

Linguine with steamed vongole and chilli; anything that comes with radicchio salad.

**X74**

**10 Bream Street, Coogee, 9665 2222**

Seven days; breakfast, 7am-4pm; lunch, noon-4pm; dinner, Thu, Fri and Sat, 6-10pm

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