



History class

A sensitive upgrade of a heritage space transforms a former department store into an intimate and chic local.

Photographs DAN HOCKING Words CARLI PHILIPS



This page, from top left 'Bocella' pendant lights by Boffi shine the spotlight on Soot Chevron tiles from Urban Edge Ceramics. Mattiazzi 'Osso' stools in ash await patrons. Powdercoated Dowel Jones 'Lord Sconce' custom mirrors by HG, hand-dipped in paint on site.

THE UGLY DUCKLING ALWAYS HAD PROMISE, yet a history of negligent occupants and design ambivalence made it difficult for many to see its potential. Not so for owner David Abela who has remained steadfastly loyal, holding onto the building for 10 years. Now, in a name befitting its moniker, the Richmond site has blossomed into a beautiful bar.

Formerly a department store, the property has also housed a shoe factory outlet and a discount pharmacy whose tenants requested that the precious skylight be covered up because it was fading stock. This year, soot and grime were swept away to reveal a light-drenched atrium.

Committed to honouring the original architecture, David and his business partners Andrew Ryan, managing director of Mitchelton Wines and director of Melbourne Pub Group, and general manager Daniel Vid enlisted interior designers Hecker Guthrie. Sensitivity to the heritage architecture was paramount, says Hamish Guthrie. "Our approach was that anything new we brought in we tried to keep almost like a piece of furniture that only lightly touched the existing shell."

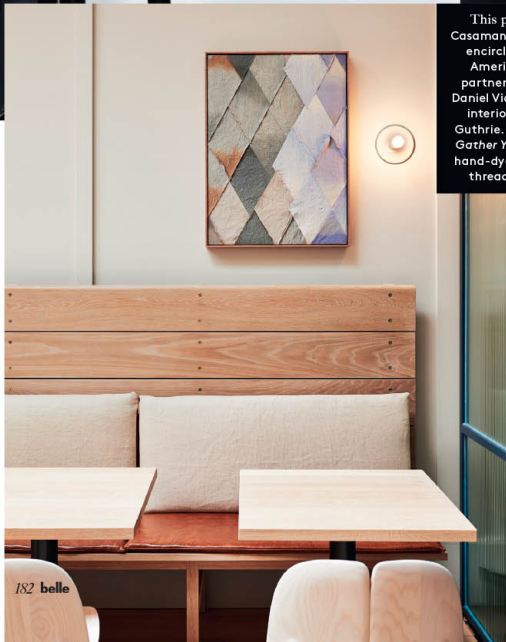
The design brief was succinct: a stylish residence-like atmosphere with the functionality of a hospitality space. The result is an intimate and chic venue that embraces the neighbourhood as opposed to promoting it as a 'destination' spot. "We want repeat locals; we want it to be an extension of their living room," says David.

Lined in Chevron tiles, the entrance is intimate and moody while the rear is clean and light, with various neutral-hued chairs and stools, such as Casamania's 'Raphia' armchair and Mattiazzi's sculptural 'Osso' stool. Ramped up with over-scaled pot plants and a generous skylight, the space "mimics the natural feel of a conservatory," says Hamish.





This page, from top left Casamania 'Raphia' armchairs encircle custom tables in American oak. Business partners Andrew Ryan and Daniel Vid, owner David Abela, interior designer Hamish Guthrie. *Awake at Dawn and Gather Yourselves* artwork in hand-dyed fabric and cotton thread by Starlie Gelkie.



Looking up at the pressed metal ceiling and into the glass void, a view of the surrounding buildings evokes New York or London.

"A successful house is made up of rooms with a different purpose or mood. That's what we've tried to create here," says Hamish. "Obviously, it's one space but there's a change in personality. We always knew that people would gravitate towards the back because it has that beautiful aspect of light. And by having the bar in the front there's a deliberate intent to engage with the street."

Drinks take centre stage and the offerings feature a specially curated premium wine list, neat pours and classic cocktails. "When you're at home drinking a bottle of wine you don't really cook an entire meal, you maybe just put out some cheese and nuts. We wanted the food concept to reflect that," says Daniel of the small antipasto-style snacks menu featuring truffle potato chips, artisan salumi and cheese plates delivered on Mud crockery.

"There are references throughout that people are familiar with and hopefully will keep coming back to," says Hamish. "It's not about a big bang. It's just somewhere that feels real." With David's office just upstairs it looks like after-work drinks are on the boss.

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