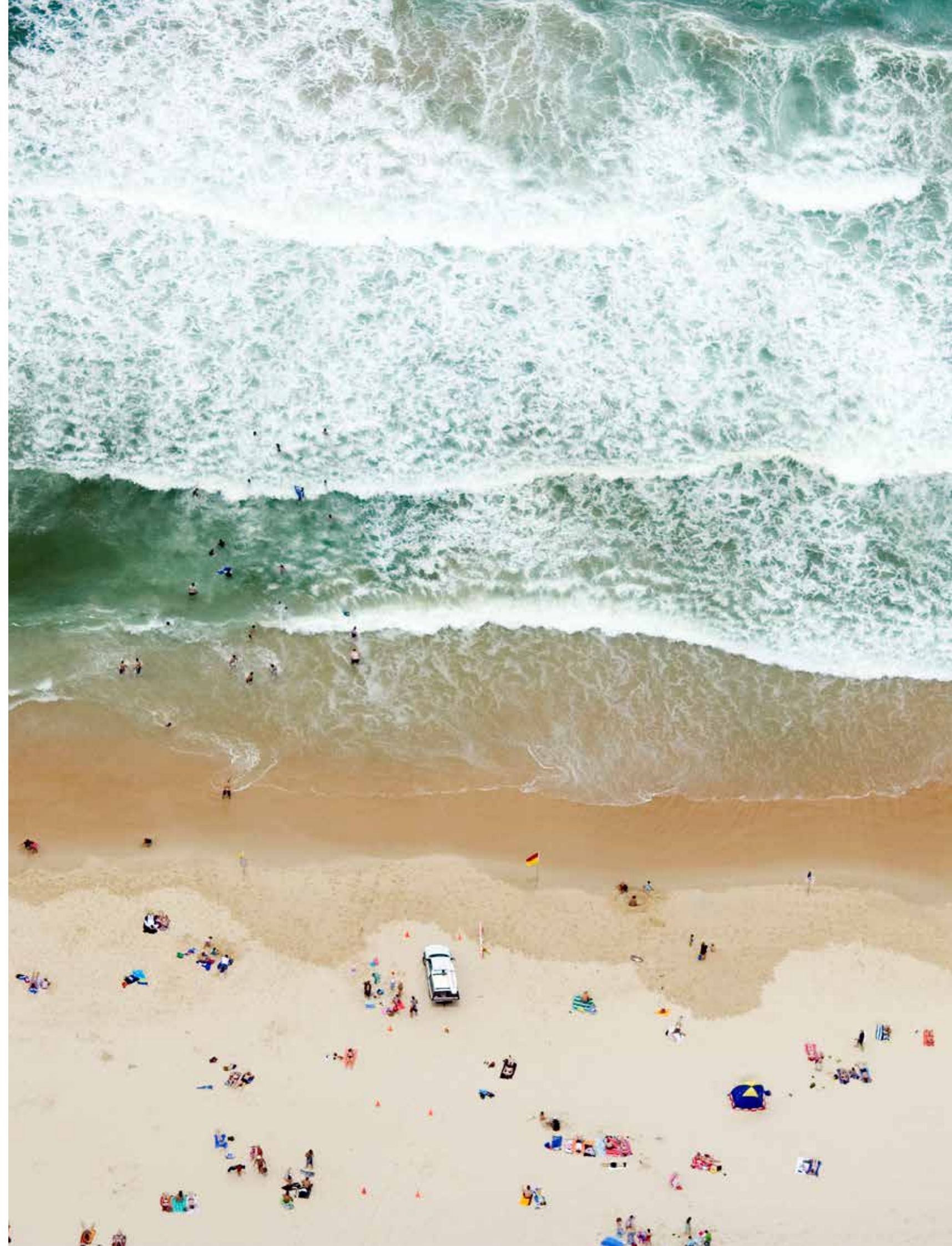


Game on, Gold

Photography **RUSSELL SHAKESPEARE**

Coast

With the Commonwealth Games on the horizon, **FIONA DONNELLY** checks the state of play at the Gold Coast's best drinking and dining destinations and finds they're kicking goals.



We're dithering on a footpath beside the Gold Coast Highway at Burleigh Heads. There's no sign to indicate we've arrived at our destination. We can't even find a door handle. We're learning that some of the tastiest choices on the Gold Coast are the least obvious.

Behind Iku Yakitori Bar's heavy iron-framed door and traditional Japanese blue noren curtain is a dimly lit charcoal-toned interior with floors and walls clad in grey stone. There's tatami seating in suspended recycled-timber booths and leather stools around a custom-made binchotan grill. Add a likeable menu – from tsukune with a raw-egg dipping sauce, to grilled chicken tail, cartilage, heart and oysters – and the dial is firmly set to fun.

Iku is the handiwork of Gold Coast locals Mitch and Nerissa McCluskey. The absence of signage is a nod to the experiences in Japan that inspired them. "It just feels super-Japanese to us," says Mitch. "It reminds us of walking down cobblestoned laneways where you might see a random door and you need to take a risk to go in. The idea of not being able to see in – where you've got to peer in – just really appealed."

The McCluskeys are among a wave of Gold Coast entrepreneurs who see no need to oversimplify menus and experiences for travellers. "Lots of people are excited about the Commonwealth Games," says Mitch, "but we're excited for what happens afterwards. The international exposure will be amazing and the ripple-on effect should help us to get even better."

Organisers are expecting an influx of visitors and a global audience of 1.5 billion viewers when the XXI Commonwealth Games opens at Carrara Stadium on 4 April. Athletes from 70 nations and territories will participate in 11 days of events staged at 17 venues on the Gold Coast, Brisbane, Cairns and Townsville.

Simon Gloftis, whose destination Greek restaurant Hellenika in Nobby Beach has just undergone a multimillion-dollar renovation, is another Gold Coast restaurateur confident that Queensland's second city is primed for its international close-up. "The Gold Coast's best days are in front of it," he says. "There are some truly amazing buildings and landlords, and a lot of investment on the way."

Of course, there's much more to the Gold Coast than the high-rise skyline. Ranked as Australia's sixth biggest city, it spans 57 kilometres of coastline, hinterland tracts of World Heritage-listed Gondwana rainforest and a string of urban hubs from Southport's Broadwater Parklands in the north to the white sands of Coolangatta in the south.

For the best dining and drinking on the Gold Coast, here's our Games plan.



PREVIOUS PAGES
Surfers Paradise Beach. Clockwise from left: The Collective, in Palm Beach's old post office; surfers from Currumbin Alley Surf School; champion surfer Mick Fanning's Balter Brewing Company.

EAT & DRINK

Balter Brewing Company

If Balter's co-founder Mick Fanning were fictional, his successes might be considered a little too far-fetched – a three-time world-champion surfer, a great-white-shark puncher and a craft brewery owner? His latest achievement, in partnership with half a dozen mates, is tucked away on an industrial estate at Currumbin. Head to the taproom, overlooking the steel tanks where brewing is under way, for a tasting paddle featuring the work of champion brewer Scott Hargrave. Or settle with a schooner in the Astrourfed laneway outside, under cheery striped umbrellas and a water-mist cooling system. Designated drivers can try a cooling hop soda with lime. *Open Fri 3pm-9pm, Sat-Sun 1pm-8pm. 14 Traders Wy, Currumbin, (07) 5525 6916, balter.com.au*

The Collective

Palm Beach's old post office is pushing the envelope in a new direction. It has been transformed into a 300-seat marketplace-style hub with five eateries sharing a sunken dining space, and a rooftop bar. There's a \$3 a head service charge and dishes arrive randomly from various kitchens, ranging from

wood-fired pizza and roasted pork shoulder with chipotle to duck pancakes and tequila prawn tacos. The Italian Job has a separate, gluten-free pizza menu. *Open daily noon-late. 1128 Gold Coast Hwy, Palm Beach, (07) 5618 8229, thecollectivepalmbeach.com.au*

The Fish House

Queensland's top-rated seafood restaurant serves a spectacular haul of Australia's finest fish prepared by chef Damien Styles, matched by stunning pine-fringed views along Burleigh Beach to the high-rises of Surfers Paradise. *Open daily noon-3.30pm (weekends 4.30pm), 5.30pm-9.30pm (weekends 11.30pm). 50 Goodwin Tce, Burleigh Heads, (07) 5535 7725, thefishhouse.com.au*

Goccia

Goccia is Italian for drop. This was the nickname of Loris Perobello, co-owner of this no-frills family-style venue, during his tomato-splashed training as a pizzaiolo. Expect crisp, thin-based pizze cooked in an oven made in Verona, the hometown of Perobello and co-owner Anna Gazzola. *Open Mon-Thu 5pm-9pm, Fri-Sun noon-3pm, 5pm-9.30pm (Sun 9pm). 1a/2375 Gold Coast Hwy, Mermaid Beach, (07) 5572 3008 >*



Hellenika

At Sunday lunch, with Greek music on rotation and chatty family gatherings installed at simple timber-topped tables, you could believe you'd pitched-up in Athens. A \$2.4 million renovation last year rebuilt the street-level dining space, elevating everything to glossy estiatorio level but without changing Hellenika's big taverna heart. Gauzy curtains, stippled stucco and recessed lighting have replaced original brick finishes and the rustic olive-tree mural. The smart Greek-leaning wine list now runs to nearly 500 choices, from a chardonnay-malagousia blend from the Peloponnese to a crisp Santorini assyrtiko by the glass. Service under owner Simon Gloftis and manager Theo Kampolis is some of the best on the coast. Meals may be ferried out on modish pink plates but the finer points of tradition are not sacrificed in the likes of grey-mullet taramasalata, perhaps, or John Dory done Corfu bianco-style with spuds and a side of horta. Don't miss King George whiting fillets fresh off the charcoal grill, scattered with baby capers and served with lemon and zucchini. *Open daily 5pm-late, lunch Sun noon-3.30pm. 2235 Gold Coast Hwy, Nobby Beach, (07) 5572 8009, hellenika.com.au*

Heven-yah Gelato

This is no vanilla ice-cream shop. The exotic likes of pineapple and yuzu sorbetto, and cultured crème fraîche gelato with maple pear and hazelnut praline are listed on the blackboard menu alongside gelati in proper enclosed Pozzetti display cases. Twentysomething

sisters Holly and Amy Prosser make their gelati on-site daily using Queensland milk and seasonal ingredients sourced locally. *Open Tue-Fri noon-10pm, Sat-Sun 11am-10pm. 2/2387 Gold Coast Hwy, Mermaid Beach*

Iku Yakitori

Beyond the heavy door at this hip yakitori-ya is a handsome dining bar and custom glassed-in robata grill to the right, and weathered tatami-style timber booths to the left. Perfectly seasoned tsukune are a reliable benchmark of the kitchen's skill, and Iku's juicy sticks pass with distinction. Backing onto the laneway behind the eatery is Iku's whisky-focused bar, with a navy-blue velvet lounge and a cracking cocktail list that's rotated weekly. *Open daily 5pm-late. 1730 Gold Coast Hwy, Burleigh Heads, (07) 5568 7300, ikuyakitoribar.com.au*

Jimmy Wah's

The classical smarts of chef co-owner Jake Cooley are evident in the balance of flavours and precise punch delivered at this modern Vietnamese diner. *Open daily noon-2.30pm, Mon-Thu 5.30pm-8.30pm (Fri-Sat 9.30pm). 1724 Gold Coast Hwy, Burleigh Heads, (07) 5659 1180, jimmywahs.com.au*

Kiyomi

This modern izakaya-style Japanese restaurant is located in The Star's lobby, overlooking the ker-ching of its casino, but sushi chef Lenny Lim's assured

Above: Heven-yah's Amy Prosser (left) and sister Holly, and their peaches and cream gelato (left). Opposite, from top left: octopus at Hellenika; Iku Yakitori's head chef Tomo Akiyama; wood-fired pork shoulder, orecchiette primavera, and mussels with charred sourdough at Lupo.



handiwork ensures eyes are on the sashimi sampler. It's the northern outpost for chef Chase Kojima of Soko in Sydney, and the arrival last year of head chef Yonge Kim, formerly of Saké, has added extra energy to the kitchen. Try signatures such as "crisp rice, spicy tuna", pieces of lightly caramelised rice topped with folds of raw tuna and spicy aioli, or keep it classic with David Blackmore wagyu skirt steak with wasabi and char-grilled lemon. Set menus provide a tasty overview. *Open daily 5.30pm-late. The Star, 1 Casino Dr, Broadbeach, (07) 5592 8100, star.com.au*

Lupo

The plating at Lupo is simple and the results deeply flavoursome. Briny sweet clams and haricot beans steamed in a wood-fired oven, ladled onto sourdough toast that's been slathered in aioli. Crisp-skinned roast chicken with mascarpone, lemon and rosemary, and buffalo mozzarella with an heirloom tomato salad topped with pangrattato. A modest exterior and unremarkable location overlooking a carpark make this European-style, family-owned neighbourhood hangout easy to miss. The warmth is apparent the moment you arrive, and it's not just the heat from the brick oven. Linger at the horseshoe-shaped bar and explore a wine list that's half small-batch and minimal-intervention and half European, or settle on bentwood chairs in a dimly lit room with a hip French-bistro aesthetic. *Open Tue-Sat 5.30pm-11pm. 2460 Gold Coast Hwy, Mermaid Beach, 0424 675 774, restaurantlupo.com.au ▶*



Mamasan

A fast-paced fusion of traditional and modern Asian cuisine, Mamasan's food is delivered in glam surroundings with winning cocktails. Well-priced banquet menus feature the likes of Sichuan salted duck and rich red wagyu curry. *Open daily noon-late. 3 Oracle Blvd, Broadbeach, (07) 5527 5700, mamasanbroadbeach.com*

The North Room

The shopping-strip location alongside the gritty highway is pure new-wave Gold Coast. But the precise lines and well-considered interiors - bright white walls, ink-blue banquette, marble-topped comptoir - of this light-filled 28-seater appear almost Scandinavian. Chicken-skin crisps sprinkled with gherkin salt set the tone for the adept dishes that follow - Tasmanian oysters with lemon, rosemary and melted smoked pork fat, say, tender octopus tentacle with tart green tomato, lardo and curry leaf, or a fillet of jewfish with soured onion, almond cream and broad beans. Chef Tim Stewart and his wife, Shannon, are hands-on owners and there's precision in every detail. *Open Tue-Thu 4pm-late, Fri-Sat noon-late. 1/2527 Gold Coast Hwy, Mermaid Beach 0468 311 003, thenorthroom.com.au*

Rabbath

Rabbath isn't much bigger than an espresso bar, yet a seat at the pass provides some of the best kitchen theatre on the coast, and Queensland's finest Lebanese dining. Watch as trays of freshly baked baklava are

drizzled with hot syrup, as fluffy falafel are prepared à la minute, and as seven-spiced lamb koftas caramelize on the grill. All the while, owner Patrick Rabbath and sous-chef Jordie Heath are preparing khoubiz flatbreads, spooning out labneh and scattering pomegranate pearls on baba ghanoush. A highlight is dry-aged bifteck; it arrives in a pool of lemon and garlic-spiked clarified butter with thick twice-cooked frites. *Open Wed-Sun 5.30pm-late. 7a/2 The Esplanade, Burleigh Heads, (07) 5535 4141, rabbath.com.au*

Rick Shores

A table on the breezy ground floor of this glam, one-starred pan-Asian destination restaurant is close enough to the surf to inhale the spray. The menu roves widely and mixes cultures, yet the results are finely calibrated - a Massaman curry could arrive with katsu-style beef brisket, while smoky beef tartare might be enriched with Korean miso. Tempura Moreton Bay bug makes for a tasty twist on the classic lobster roll, the mayo spiked with lime. A fun cocktail list includes a Japanese play on the Margarita, with pickled plum salt and orange rum. *Open Tue-Sun noon-late. Shop 3, 43 Goodwin Tce, Burleigh Heads, (07) 5630 6611, rickshores.com.au*

Sparrow Eating House

It's so well priced - a four-course weekend lunch with a glass of wine costs \$35 - that the quality of these share plates comes as a surprise. Spicy calamari comes with ►

Above: (clockwise from top) boned chicken wings, oysters with smoked pork fat, blue-eye with broad beans, sour onion and shaved almonds, crisp chicken skin with gherkin salt, shaved sprouts with macadamia, at The North Room, and head chef Tim Stewart. Opposite: Surfers Paradise from North Burleigh.

a lime-paprika salt, while Moreton Bay bugs are split and splashed with jalapeño butter and lime. Cool industrial surrounds and a smart wine list encourage diners to linger. As we go to press, owner Andrew Whiting is also set to open a new, 140-seat version of his Elk Espresso, one of the Gold Coast's favourite cafés, over the road from Kurrawa Surf Club. *Open Tue 5.30pm-10pm, Wed-Fri 5.30pm-11pm, Sat-Sun noon-11pm. 2/32 Lavarack Rd, Nobby Beach, (07) 5575 3330, sparroweatinghouse.com.au*

Yamagen

A revamp last year by QT's favourite designer, Nic Graham, has turned this 30-year-old teppanyaki institution on the ground floor of QT Gold Coast into a high-energy izakaya-style diner. The focus is on modern Japanese – tuna and sashimi tacos, perhaps, and wagyu skewers with wasabi butter from the grill. Former Kiyomi head chef Adam Lane now oversees the team. *Open Mon-Sat 5pm-late. QT Gold Coast, 7 Staghorn Ave, Surfers Paradise, (07) 5584 1200, qthotelsandresorts.com*

CAFÉS

Actor Margot Robbie kicked off her hens' party with a hands-on session at **Bam Bam Bakehouse**. The café-pâtisserie's glassed-in pastry kitchen allows customers to see croissants, tarts and choux puffs being crafted, whether celebs are in the house or not. Hidden in a Currumbin industrial estate is **Dust Temple**, an extraordinary boho warehouse conversion where the cabinets of treats and carefully made coffee roasted by Brisbane's Fonzie Abbott take second place to the surrounds – a gallery-like space that hosts artists, poets and musos. **Marie Anita's** at Mermaid Beach is a reliable source of gluten-free treats, from savoury grilled tempeh and fermented vegetable bowls to sweet baked goods and breads. Palm Beach's neighbourhood hang **Mr Bengel** is run by the same team that created Justin Lane Establishment at nearby Burleigh Heads; expect similarly breezy service, cool white beach surrounds, draped greenery and good coffee. *Bam Bam Bakehouse, 2519 Gold Coast Hwy, Mermaid Beach, (07) 5526 5218, bambabakehouse.com; Dust Temple, 54 Currumbin Creek Rd, Currumbin, 0401 727 433, dusttemple.com.au; Marie Anita's, 2364 Gold Coast Hwy, Mermaid Beach, (07) 5572 3224, marieanitas.com.au; Mr Bengel, 1099 Gold Coast Hwy, Palm Beach, mrbengel.com.au*

BARs

Does booze taste better when the search for it works up a thirst? A cache of hidden bars on the Gold



Coast suggests it might. The exterior of **The Scottish Prince** at Palm Beach is completely obscured by block-out drapes. The timber-panelled, whisky-focused den named for a local shipwreck opened last year; it's a sibling to nautically themed **The Cambus Wallace** at Nobby Beach, where signage is equally low-key. The entrance to **Lockwood Bar** in a Burleigh Heads laneway is marked only by a red door with an oversized key, giving no clue to the raucous pleasures inside. Next door is grungy dive bar **Nightjar** featuring street art and neon slogans. On the same lane is the backdoor entrance to **Iku Yakitori's** carefully stocked lounge; look for the sign with a fish fighting a chicken. For European-leaning snacks and a glass of natural wine, seek out **Tasca**, hidden in plain sight on the main drag of Coolangatta. *The Scottish Prince, 27/1176 Gold Coast Hwy, Palm Beach, (07) 5598 3021, thescottishprince.wordpress.com; The Cambus Wallace, 4/2237 Gold Coast Hwy, Nobby Beach, (07) 5575 3420, thecambuswallace.com.au; Lockwood, 7b Justin La, Burleigh Heads, 0488 111 030, lockwoodbar.com; Nightjar, Justin La, Burleigh Heads, nightjar.com.au; Tasca, 114 Griffith St, Coolangatta, 0404 167 081, tascacoolangatta.com*



Rick Shores in Burleigh Heads. Top left: Bam Bam Bakehouse and (below) its Ribena éclair; view from the 51st floor at Peppers Soul.

STAY

Bon Sol

Pop your complimentary bottle of vintage sparkling wine (sometimes Krug) and toast a decision well made. If the beautifully detailed interiors of this two-bedroom apartment in a retro brick beachfront block remind you of boutique Halcyon House, just across the New South Wales border, it's because they were both designed by Anna Spiro. Contrasting linens adorn just about everything, from padded bedheads and walls to one-off pieces of furniture. Textures underfoot are sisal and custom tiles, and finishes elsewhere are plush: marble-topped washstands, Fragonard soaps, Moss River linen, goose-down pillows. A full-sized kitchen is equipped with Riedel glasses, Villeroy & Boch dinnerware and a coffee machine. Call ahead and the drinks trolley can be filled with your favourites before check-in. Watch the surf from the balcony, trot 100 steps to the beach or stroll to the heart of Burleigh Heads. Stay tuned for a second apartment opening late this year. *44 The Esplanade, Burleigh, 0499 114 162, bonsol.com.au*

Peppers Soul

You don't have to book a Peppers Soul Sky View apartment (level 40 and above) with spa bath and balcony to be transfixed by blue-on-blue vistas. This hotel sits across the road from Surfers Paradise Beach, and panoramas from its impressive third-storey recreation area are hard to beat, too. Interiors in the two- to three-bedroom apartments and penthouses are neutral urban-chic but public areas feature blinged-up finishes: the sweeping staircase from lobby to reception is made for posing; ditto the *Alice in Wonderland* high-backed armchairs. There's also a heated pool, gym, sauna and steam room, free secure parking, and wi-fi access. *8 The Esplanade, Surfers Paradise, 1300 987 600, peppers.com.au*

The Star Grand

There's a touch of James Bond in the deluxe King Terrace Suites at The Star Grand. It's not just the presence of a casino on the ground floor, or the glamorous views of skyscrapers and pine-fringed ocean, (best seen from a corner room above the 18th floor) – a flurry of high-tech flourishes await, such as the window screens that glide open as you enter the room. L'Occitane amenities include a loofah, and a tube of lip balm at turndown is another thoughtful touch. An adjacent all-suite tower, The Darling, is scheduled to open in time for the Commonwealth Games, with an infinity pool, and restaurant overseen by respected Gold Coast restaurateur Simon Gloftis. Watch this space. *1 Casino Dr, Broadbeach, (07) 5592 8100, star.com.au* ●