

Why a fashion label’s fine-dining restaurant won over our cynical, shopping-phobe critic

Rodd & Gunn “brand extension”, the newly hatted restaurant The Lodge Dining Room, is a charming place for long lunches and dinners, reviews Dani Valent. Plus: there’s free bread that’s good enough to pay for.



Dani Valent

February 20, 2026



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1 / 10 Wonderful, natural light gleams on black floorboards of The Lodge Dining Room on level one of Rodd & Gunn’s flagship store.

BONNIE SAVAGE

15/20

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Contemporary \$\$\$\$

Maybe retail isn't dead, at least not here, where selling polo shirts and quarter-zip knits is a mere adjunct to a hospitality mega-venue which makes even me – a shopping-phobe who'd only walk into a menswear shop via a tweed-blind wrong turn – feel fond of Rodd & Gunn.

In a CBD power play, the New Zealand clothing company has rethought a striking Commercial Gothic building that was built in 1929 for G.J. Coles as a variety store. Between 1987 and 2020, it was the blokey part of David Jones.



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Now, level one is The Lodge, a fine-dining restaurant at the top of a marble staircase. Below is the mezzanine Member's Bar (membership isn't required, but merely sitting on a leather couch feels like being ensconced in a cabal). On ground level, there's the "shop" – such a vulgar word, as though buying a shirt was a pragmatic act, not an investment in identity. Meanwhile, the basement is home to a tremendous wine store and bistro with gorgeous booths for pasta and polpette. As much as I'm cynical about the notion of brand generally and brand extension utterly, it's all so very lovely.

The Lodge is a place for charming lunches and long dinners. I see you sipping exquisite cocktails, crunching mackerel "cigars" and choosing glossy, chocolate truffles from a tray held aloft by a warm, knowledgeable waiter.

Art deco wall tiles – left, for decades, to crumble behind shirt racks – have been restored, while velvet banquettes accompany double-clothed tables under soaring arched windows. Wonderful, natural light gleams on black floorboards (although the after-dark illumination is a little bright). Overall, it's a glorious, architecturally sensitive next life for a city landmark.



Bread, a crown-shaped brioche brushed with a caramel made from vegetable scraps, is complimentary. BONNIE SAVAGE

The food and drinks are classic and poised, with jaunty flourishes. There are signals of quality in the premium ingredients, the seasoning, saucing and composition.

The bread is free but good enough to pay for: fluffy, crown-shaped brioche is brushed with a sticky caramel made from reduced vegetable scraps.

Small bites include a pretty beetroot meringue layered with horseradish mousse: have these in the restaurant or the bar, paired, perhaps, with a Forest Forage martini garnished with pink peppercorn leaves.

Eel is a tough sell, but the entree is very good, the smoked fish turned into a rich parfait served with a medley of summer tomatoes and dressed with tomato consomme poured tableside.



The Great Ocean Road duck dish comprises glazed, roasted breast with a mini sausage roll. BONNIE SAVAGE

Free-range Great Ocean Duck is served as a glazed, roasted breast with the leg and offal turned into a mini sausage roll – a cute touch, like an untucked shirt on an otherwise impeccable mannequin.

Desserts show creativity and skill. Of all the dishes I ate, I keep thinking about the fennel and apricot tea cake: the balance of layers, a persistent moisture that steered away from heaviness, the fennel crumb that added crunch and the luxe Earl Grey cream that brought it all together. How good is cake?



Fennel and apricot tea cake with Earl Grey cream. BONNIE SAVAGE

Rodd & Gunn has made a bold pitch to Melbourne. It's impossible to deny the polish, accomplishment and clever span of offerings. It's not the kind of variety store that G.J. Coles could ever have imagined, but I bet the retail maestro would have appreciated the vision, optimism and maybe, even, a beetroot meringue.

The low-down

Atmosphere: Sophisticated and luxurious

Go-to dishes: Great Ocean Road duck (\$66); Forest Forage martini (\$29); beetroot meringue (\$12 for 2); fennel and apricot tea cake (\$18)

Drinks: The cocktails are high art and the wine list is long and lovely, with an appropriately deep collection of New Zealanders. There are a few bottles in the \$70s but most are above \$100. Wines by the glass are excellent but expensive. I'd love to see premium pours balanced by great-value house wines served in the Cellar.

Cost: About \$280 for two, excluding drinks

This review was originally published in Good Weekend magazine.

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Dani Valent is a food writer and restaurant reviewer.

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