

BOTANICAL BLOOMS AGAIN

The Bot went from hot property to hot potato in the space of a couple of years. Now it's finding its feet and charming hearts again.

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Feature

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Affectionately known as' has been apologetically prefixed to every mention of the equally affectionately nicknamed, The Bot, in recent times. The phrase sums up the goodwill Melbourne still holds for one-time institution, The Botanical, that after a spell in the dumps looks on the up again.

For those that are less affectionately acquainted with the storied history of South Yarra's The Botanical restaurant, here's a brief overview of the fairytale so far. In 2002, entrepreneur Chris Lucas and chef Paul Wilson swept in and turned a flagging underachiever into the belle of the ball. After carving out a name for herself as a fine dining institution, she was teased away from Lucas by the Cornerstone Group offering unprecedented riches for her hand [reportedly \$16m]. But Cornerstone was on a buying binge, gobbling up much of what was on offer. Two long years later, things were not looking good for the happy couple. Cornerstone had bitten off more than it could chew and The Bot's image had suffered from neglect. Finally another suitor, multi-millionaire Computershare founder Chris Morris on his Colonial Leisure Group steed, swept in from the far West to buy up key pieces of Cornerstone's portfolio and save The Bot from an early demise.

All that in a couple of years. It's enough to leave a bad taste in anyone's mouth. But by the look of things on a weekday lunch at Botanical, this storybook ending is looking up. It's vibrant, busy, and bright.

A CHANGE OF DIRECTION

To return an iconic venue to its heyday (The Bot ascended to the heights of Good Food Guide 'Restaurant of the Year' in 2004), it would be tempting to dial up the nostalgia and ring in a few past stars. But sailing too close to the original would still leave plenty of room for critics to wave away the new look Bot as 'not as good as the old Bot'. Webb Plus designed the new Botanical, and Design Director Adrian Downes revealed that although the fitout is mostly brand new, there are still a few elements that are sure to trigger a few 'old Bot' memories. The wine wall is still there, albeit reclad, a few of the large artichoke-shape lights have been reused, the leaf branding has been re-implemented with a modern touch, and the fireplace has been retained. By no means was this a cost-saving exercise, as the level of finishes makes clear, but rather a nod to regulars to let them know Colonial honours the old Bot while making way for the new.

THE PUB KNOW-HOW

Colonial isn't just another group gobbling up debt on a buying binge. Rather, it has built up a strong reputation based on not only successful venue management, but also as a top brewer with a great attention to craft and detail. Right

in the heartland of Western Australia winemaking terroir, Margaret River, Colonial Brewing Company has won a few awards for best small brewery, and a number for its signature beer Kolsch, including the WA Premier's trophy for Best WA Beer.

Colonial's brewing know-how has meant a particular leaning towards pub venues for the group. Given that the Botanical failed as a restaurant under different management, Colonial was keen to ever so slightly change the emphasis and gear the Botanical away from being a restaurant, to being a restaurant in a pub. For Downes, that meant Webb Plus "changed the whole focus, so the back bar is more prominent. Opening it up, and making it much more obvious where you want to go when you arrive. It was not about disrespecting what was there already, and what had obviously been very successful, with a lot of regular clientele. It's something that would appeal to them, but then attract a slightly different crowd as well."

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Heading up the charge to reinstate the Botanical's food credentials is Malaysian-born chef Cheong Liew. Liew is one of Australia's finest chefs — he has a medal of the Order of Australia to prove it. His most famous venture being The Grange at the Hilton in Adelaide, which he opened in 1995, and after over a decade of celebrated food finally called it quits. It did follow a bollocking at the hands of a high-profile food reviewer, which you could read a little deeper into, but fact of the matter remains that Liew is and has been at the top echelon of Aussie chefs for 30 years. And after kicking off his career in Melbourne, has finally made it back again. "He's very excited by it," says Grady Patching, Victoria Area Manager for Colonial, "He was chef in Adelaide for 30 years, and now he's back in Melbourne where he started in pubs and hotels so he feels like he's giving a little bit back in a way. He's a very calm and collected guy, and he'll blow your mind. If you eat something, or go out with him, he could name every ingredient that's in a dish. I doubt many people could do that. I can't! That's what the young guys that are with him are learning."

WHAT WENT WRONG

It wasn't just Botanical that Colonial took over. Its sister restaurant Half Moon, and popular pizza bars Bimbo's and Lucky Coq (converted from live music during Cornerstone's time), were among a number of venues that enabled Colonial to instantly build a strong presence in Victoria. But as Colonial has shown by keeping strong concepts Bimbo's and Lucky Coq as is, not everything needs to change for the sake of it. That's why not only a few familiar design cues remain, but so do a number of familiar faces. "Everybody that has left, left," said Patching, implying they'd rather retool old staff and give them a chance rather than retrench them.

"We're about giving them the skills to be business managers rather than venue managers. That's what our whole company philosophy is about." And how do they do that? Grady Patching again: "It's about coaching them and giving them the tools. Now they control their own reporting and report to us instead of us giving them the report. It's about giving them more responsibility and more nous about figures, so they know how their businesses are performing every day rather than when the office tells them once a month — they see it coming in live. It's a big difference when you can see what you're spending or doing. Some of the guys had never written a budget till Colonial came along. So it's a big learning experience for them."

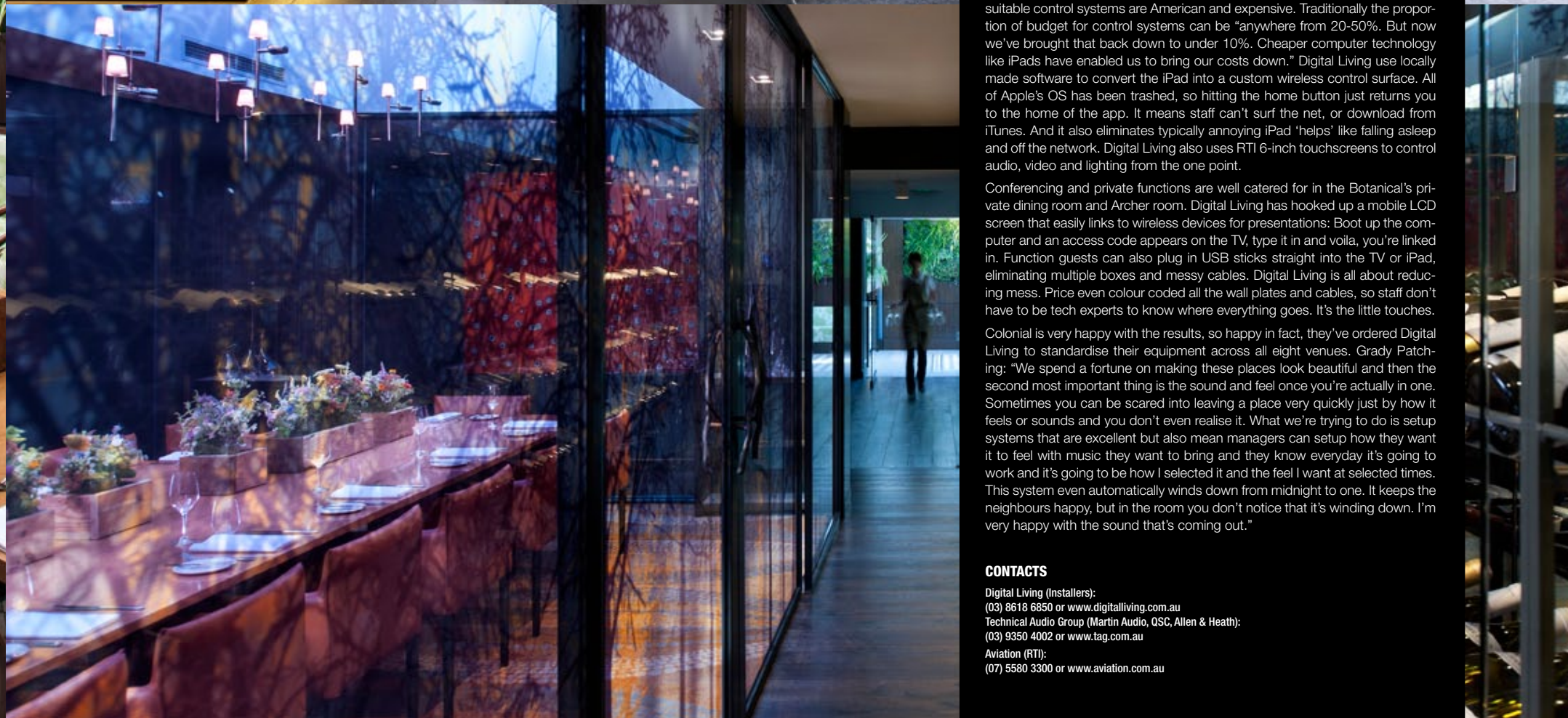
BIG CHANGES

Botanical has gone through a full makeover at the hands of Webb Plus, and while there's a new conservatory at the back, which is now one of the hallmark features of the space, a new glass-walled private dining room, alfresco dining on the pavement, and more emphasis on the bar, Webb Plus made a concerted effort to make sure everything tied together. "Each area has its own identity, but then we've got consistency in flooring and certain finishes, which tie everything together," explains Adrian Downes. "We've got the same leather in the banquettes in the café as we have on some of the dining seats, as we have on the chairs in the conservatory as well. So you don't feel like you're walking into a completely different space."

"It's tricky, because [Colonial] is trying to appeal to a lot of people," says Downes. "And they are open from seven in the morning, all the way through to late at night. So you've got to deal with all those different markets."

The dining room is set apart by the use of Brintons carpet to add luxury and break up the harder flooring. "There's a slightly richer palette in the dining room — leather, lush fabrics, and great artwork," continues Downes. "It's also more intimate than the café. There was a move to go away from minimal Scandinavian, to bring in a richer scheme."

One of the highlights, other than the enclosed canopy Conservatory is the private dining room, with a large sliding panel that opens up almost direct contact with the kitchen. "It's a little bit like a chef's table concept, says Downes. "We wanted it to sit as a very light structure within the space, so the sides are glass, and the walls have a custom tree graphic designed for them, referencing the Botanical Gardens. The tabletop is going to be changed soon. One of the joiners bought a tree that was directly opposite, which is going to be made into the top. But unfortunately it wasn't dry enough for when we finished. But it's something that will happen further down the line — a little story with the location."



DRYING UP

Tim Bryar, The Botanical's Wine Buyer, shares with **venue** how Colonial brews are travelling in Victoria, Botanical's up-market bottle-o, and why a new batch of Riesling perfectly suits Botanical's new chef.

"Being part of CLG, a Western Australian-based brewery, The Botanical serves as a showcase for Colonial products in Victoria. We have an artisanal Witbier offering and Colonial Kolsch — which would be put in the high-repetition beer category — on tap in all of the Colonial-owned venues, of which there are eight at this stage, with a couple more coming. And the beers have been very well received.

The old Botanical format was that all wine in the wine wall and retail section could be either taken away or drunk on premise. It was a first along with European in the city. We've maintained some of that philosophy in the wine store, in that anything that's bought in the shop you are able to drink on premise, whereas the wine wall has become a showcase for the list itself.

The wine list has changed substantially from the old restaurant. We have about 60% of the list coming from the New

World (Australia, USA, New Zealand, etc), and 40% from the Old World (Italy, France, Germany, etc).

We've got a lot of Asian influence in the food, so the Riesling section tends to go quite well. Riesling can carry a bit of sugar, and we find that a bit of residual sugar goes quite well with Cheong's food. In saying that, there are also quite a few other varieties, Pinot Gris for one, that also go very well with his food.

There seems to be a shift in Australian Riesling production. Australia has always been known for having quite a dry unique style, with a high lemon and lime fruit concentration. Winemakers seem to be adding a more Germanic style to their stable. Mac Forbes makes a Riesling from Tasmania called RS20, which stands for residual sugar at 20 grams per litre. That's very, very good. Jeffrey Grosse from the Clare Valley is also making a Gossett Off-dry. Lethbridge is a producer from Geelong, Victoria. Dr Nadesen is the name of the owner down there, and he makes an Off-dry style of Riesling, which is very good, as does Howard Park in the Margaret River. It's not just one pocket in Australia, it's a general shift, which I think is quite exciting for the country."

DIGITAL LIVING AV

Digital Living was faced with their fair share of challenges when installing the audio system at Botanical. There were low ceilings, combined with high skylight roofs. And Colonial had the vision that all the speakers would be tucked up out of the way in the ceiling, but there was no ceiling space to work with. And on top of that, the client needed the flexibility to live up the public bar when required. The order of the day was to go with Martin Audio Omniline 4-module speakers in the main room, with two AQ212 dual 12-inch subwoofers. This solved the problem of the lack of ceiling space, as the Omnilines are vertical column speakers that can be tuned for a wide dispersion, with looks that add to any design rather than taking away from it. In the Archer Room at the rear, Digital Living installed AQ8 ultra compact full range speakers that cover any function requirements. Throughout the rest of the fitout is a range of Martin Audio ceiling speakers, from 4-inch to 8-inch depending on the output and dispersion required. After a bit of trial and error trying to shoehorn speakers inbetween airducts, Digital Living found the Martin speakers provided great intelligibility and dispersion in the Private Dining Room even when surrounded by glass walls. All the zones are powered by low impedance QSC amplifiers, with signal control by an Allen & Heath iDr8 mix processor.

People always lose remotes. Matthew Price from Digital Living's solution: Get rid of remote controls and put in a does-it-all control system. Traditionally, suitable control systems are American and expensive. Traditionally the proportion of budget for control systems can be "anywhere from 20-50%. But now we've brought that back down to under 10%. Cheaper computer technology like iPads have enabled us to bring our costs down." Digital Living use locally made software to convert the iPad into a custom wireless control surface. All of Apple's OS has been trashed, so hitting the home button just returns you to the home of the app. It means staff can't surf the net, or download from iTunes. And it also eliminates typically annoying iPad 'helps' like falling asleep and off the network. Digital Living also uses RTI 6-inch touchscreens to control audio, video and lighting from the one point.

Conferencing and private functions are well catered for in the Botanical's private dining room and Archer room. Digital Living has hooked up a mobile LCD screen that easily links to wireless devices for presentations: Boot up the computer and an access code appears on the TV, type it in and voila, you're linked in. Function guests can also plug in USB sticks straight into the TV or iPad, eliminating multiple boxes and messy cables. Digital Living is all about reducing mess. Price even colour coded all the wall plates and cables, so staff don't have to be tech experts to know where everything goes. It's the little touches.

Colonial is very happy with the results, so happy in fact, they've ordered Digital Living to standardise their equipment across all eight venues. Grady Patching: "We spend a fortune on making these places look beautiful and then the second most important thing is the sound and feel once you're actually in one. Sometimes you can be scared into leaving a place very quickly just by how it feels or sounds and you don't even realise it. What we're trying to do is setup systems that are excellent but also mean managers can setup how they want it to feel with music they want to bring and they know everyday it's going to work and it's going to be how I selected it and the feel I want at selected times. This system even automatically winds down from midnight to one. It keeps the neighbours happy, but in the room you don't notice that it's winding down. I'm very happy with the sound that's coming out."

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