



Modern and retro ... dining at Red Belly; assiette of freshwater trout (below). Photos: James Brickwood



RED BELLY

15 Springfield Avenue, Potts Point.
Phone (02) 8988 6999. Licensed. Dinner
daily. Dishes \$12-\$20; mains \$29-\$35.
Critic's rating: **6/10**

> FEAST Scott Bolles

WHEN the first in a series of local hotels named after Australian artists opens just moments from the heart of Kings Cross, you expect it to get its cue from someone of Brett Whiteley's ilk. But rural gent Tim Storrier is the first to be honoured with an art house hotel moniker.

Storrier's art is a given at the hotel but what of its relationship with the interior design in the hotel's Red Belly restaurant? Transparent Barbarella-style chairs mix with television screens seemingly in the service of Australian sport. Vertical bars separate the boutique hotel's entrance and lobby from the restaurant like some sort of ode to periodic detention.

It's modern, retro and whimsical in one breath. I can't be certain of the bird species but the toilets, for instance, feature what look like flamingos on the walls and winged taps

featuring another feathered friend spouting water at the wash basin. I retreat back to Red Belly for a plate of bonsai-ed bird - quail.

Red Belly has a tasting plate option, Sydney's big trend of the moment. They aren't going to break the bank at \$12-\$20 a pop but you're going to need quite a few of them if

you're dining rather than picking. Red Belly turns out a decent ballotine of quail but the individual components of a dish of foie gras, crisp fruit brulee and toast come together on the palate more like the Three Stooges than the majesty of the Three Sisters.

There is artistry in the kitchen - food is arranged with great precision. It is technique coupled with labour-intensive craftsmanship. What it's short on at this stage is flavour. There's a touch of the muted tones of international hotel dining to some of the dishes but none of the fuller-throttle flavour you'll find at some of Sydney's other exponents of this genre.

Assiette of trout is pretty as a picture. But it's the visual that lingers longest, a gentle, almost homogenous traverse rather than a taste trek through valleys and peaks. With a little tweaking and clipping, the food could fly. A hearty lamb rack with borlotti bean puree is on the money: underplayed and well executed.

Service is still finding its feet. It lurches from a knowledgeable wine man to systems teething that short-changes us on the bill. It's an honest mistake and about the size of an average tip, so we flutter off quietly into the night.