

# THE AUSTRALIAN

## Sydney Harbour cruise goes platinum with Penfolds Grange



Sydney's Opera House and Harbour Bridge at twilight.

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The Bureau of Meteorology radar has been consulted often during the day, for tonight we need calm waters and steady hands. During the evening we will drink a toast to good health and exciting travels and our glasses will be charged with Grange.

My small group is to join Captain Cook Cruises' flagship vessel, MV Sydney 2000, for a Platinum Penfolds Grange Dinner Cruise on Sydney Harbour. I have arrived early at Circular Quay to soak in, yet again, the spectacle. A so-so day has broken into a perfect spring evening, crisp and still. A busker on acoustic guitar is going through a baby-boomer's soundtrack (not very well, but ain't that life?), a cruise ship, Carnival Legend, is departing and there they are, the fabulous quartet of the constellation — the sculptural masterpiece of the Sydney Opera House, anchored diagonally across from the merry madness of Luna Park, with the Harbour Bridge arching mightily overhead and Fort Denison (we used to call it Pinchgut) keeping sentinel. How many times have I thought, this is one of the world's great vistas?



Captain Cook Cruises' Sydney 2000 heads past the Opera House.

Departure is at 7pm and there are a few groups waiting at the wharf, mostly overseas visitors about to enjoy less ambitious fare than the platinum dinner. The vessel's dining decks are stylish and comfortable, with tables at a respectful distance. Platinum comes with window seating, VIP service and begins with canapes and bubbly on the open top deck as we head west under the Bridge past the new sandstone shoreline of Barangaroo's parkland and the area's rising skyline. This was a concrete dockland such a short time ago, and while another piece of the diverse working harbour has disappeared, what a magnificent addition is the newcomer.

We turn before the entrance to the Parramatta River, the harbour's main tributary; darkness has descended and it's all black up ahead. By day, however, I love taking the River Cat up to Parramatta on a stretch of waterway that was once industrial and polluted, and is now rehabilitated.



Penfolds Grange is the highlight of a five-course dinner during the Captain Cook cruise.

Back at the table, we are to embark on five courses of a tasting menu, each dish paired with a Penfolds wine — a pinot gris, a chardonnay, Kalimna Bin 28 shiraz and, to wrap it up, a Grandfather Rare Tawny. The penultimate course of seared aged angus beef fillet with sauteed mushrooms and seeded mustard jus will be accompanied by the Grange, 2011 vintage, bottle number B0588, to be precise. It is decanted early in the evening and the carafe sits at the centre of the table like the jewel in the crown, the dense, dark red of shiraz.

What is it about Grange, known as Grange Hermitage until 1989, that gives it icon status, indeed heritage listed by the National Trust of South Australia? The wine certainly wasn't applauded from the start. Chief winemaker Max Schubert had been at work at Penfolds Magill Estate, in Adelaide, blending from 1951, but early efforts didn't go down well with management in Sydney. Schubert persisted in secrecy, good taste won out and Grange found its place as Australia's most celebrated wine during the 1960s. Just in case you're wondering, the 2011 vintage, not considered among the very finest, sells for \$750 a bottle, at best price. The 2012 vintage, released just this week, has a recommended price of \$850.

As we sail down the harbour towards the heads we're well past the city lights, the Sydney Opera House, Garden Island naval base and the more densely populated inner eastern suburbs. Take your eyes off the shoreline and you're lost by night. There are splotches of light, but what's that dark stretch of land? Have we turned at the heads yet? I say not, but others correctly identify we are heading back down the harbour.

The meal has been superb. We've had slow-cooked pork belly, Queensland snapper with grilled king prawn, osso bucco ragu with pumpkin gnocchi. And now it's time for the beef and the Grange. How many icons can you fit in one setting? With the Sydney Opera House and Bridge up ahead, succulent Aussie beef, Grange ... if there were strains of *Tenterfield Saddler* and Phar Lap, Ginger Meggs and Don Bradman could just pop in, the gang would all be here. As it happens, our chanteuse for the evening is singing the poignantly romantic *Blue Moon* by Rodgers and Hart.

So here's the confession. I'm not a wine connoisseur, but am driven tonight by curiosity. Tasting notes for the 2011 vintage promise reticent repressed fruits soon to ascend on the palate; blackberry, blackcurrant, fig, rhubarb and quince. Expect a follow-up emission, say the notes, of black olive, shaved truffle, vanillin, boot polish, cola and ristretto coffee. Whoa! This is way out of my league. My simpler verdict, as someone who enjoys a shiraz, is that it is divine. Big and beautiful. What a perfect pairing with the melt-in-the-mouth beef, expertly prepared in the kitchen on board, as are all MV Sydney 2000's meals.

If I have one quibble, it is that, on a school night, we have had one course too many and probably didn't need the Bin 28 shiraz as a curtain raiser to the Grange. The apricot tiramisu is a squeeze (which I heroically make), but you can't be touched for generosity. I've enjoyed my national-treasure hunt — lively company, excellent food and the very best of wines. But the night belongs to Sydney Harbour. As we dock in view of the Sydney Opera House, I think of John Olsen's remarkable mural, *Salute to Five Bells*, in the upstairs north foyer of the Concert Hall. The work was inspired by Kenneth Slessor's 1937 poem *Five Bells*, about a friend who drowned in the harbour. How Slessor (and Olsen) captured it perfectly:

*I looked out of my window in the dark*

*At waves with diamond quills and*

*combs of light.*

### **Checklist**

The Platinum Penfolds Grange Dinner Cruise and the Gold Penfolds Dinner Cruise (no Grange) depart at 7pm from Circular Quay Wharf 6. The Grange cruise is \$395 a person for a table of four or more; \$495 a person for two. The gold cruise is \$199 a person.

More: [captaincook.com.au](http://captaincook.com.au).

*Graham Erbacher was a guest of Captain Cook Cruises.*