



Estelle

Award-winning chef Scott Pickett revealed his hidden building talent when he revitalised a restaurant in the funky Melbourne suburb of Northcote

“**B**efore we took over, I lived five minutes down the road and thought the venue would be a great place to hang out on a Sunday. Unfortunately, it was a cafe-bar-restaurant-breakfast-lunch-dinner sort of place—everything and nothing. Six months after it opened there was a partnership dispute and it was put on the market. I was immediately interested as I could see the bones of a great business.

“This was my first restaurant. We’ve been here nearly four years and we’ve grown over that period. Now the dining room has a modern retro feel, while the new atrium is natural and organic.

“When we took over, the only thing we kept was the bar but even that needed some work. The bar and stools were really low—it was like a bar for Smurfs! Luckily, a cabinetmaker called Ben Sibley had a workshop in the lane behind the restaurant. He had wood from the old Northcote bowling alley that was all Canadian maple and oak.

“Ben had a six-metre slab of this wood but it took eight of us to carry it back to the restaurant. We flicked it on its side

and balanced it on a skateboard all the way home. It was then transformed into our bar top and all the tables. It has real character with a nice local connection.

“We’re also renowned for the chequered patterned tiles in the front part of the restaurant. The original owner was a graphic designer by trade but to pay his way through university, he tiled. He was living upstairs so, while waiting for the liquor licence to come through, he spent his days tiling downstairs. It has a contemporary but retro feel which sums up our dining area nicely.

“The next renovation was the private dining room upstairs—it needed to be repainted and a few touch-ups. Then last summer, we rebuilt the courtyard and it’s become a beautiful enclosed atrium.

“I worked closely with builders from Prava Developments, and I wanted the indoor space to make diners feel like they’re outside. That’s why we added

vertical wall gardens, as well as native timber—a fantastic red ironbark—for the flooring. The bathrooms in this section have a Scandinavian feel with a freestanding hand basin and full wall mirror. They almost have a sauna feel.

“I also found beams from an old bridge built in the late 1800s near Geelong.

We bought them at auction and they now form the basis of the exterior roof structure. You walk out and there are massive timber triangles and a ceiling that’s about 20-foot tall in the rear area. It gives this lovely sense of space and a feeling of openness while still being warm and cosy.

“What was originally going to be a new roof and a new bathroom has become a whole other half of the restaurant that we use seven days a week. It’s heated during winter, but I’m looking forward to next summer. The courtyard is green, it’s alive, it’s beautifully lit ... it’s fantastic.” ●

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Scott Pickett, Estelle chef/owner