

STM conducts its food reviews anonymously and pays for meals in full.



PICTURES: SAM WATSON

BIRD IS THE WORD

It's funny because it didn't really occur to me that the "hot" in Drasko's Hot Chicken referred to spice rather than temperature until my face was frozen in a silent scream as I free-poured ice-cold water down my throat to put out flames that burned hotter than a Guy Fawkes bonfire on the face of the sun.

It should have occurred to me when I opened the brown paper bag I'd picked up to find a pair of gloves. No, not the white cotton kind for fancy food service – the black latex kind for handling borderline dangerous material. A hazmat suit would also have been helpful.

And you'd think I'd have worked it out when, while waiting in line, the guys in the kitchen screamed out "hot chicken!" and a progressive sneeze rolled through the packed place before everyone offered each other a blessing.

Fear not, though. You can order your bird Southern style (no heat), mild or medium. Hot, as we all now know, is forking hot. Then there is Blame Drasko – "Warning! Soul on fire". I ordered one wing of the latter (\$4) for research purposes, which only exacerbated the agony inflicted by the magnificently crispy and juicy "hot" breast tenders (\$19 with choice of sidekick – a tub of spectacular house-pickled veg – radish, pearl onion, carrot, cucumber – that cut through like nobody's business).

My dedication did not, however, extend to braving the off-menu, triple-hot 'Bastard Chilli' chicken, which uses Carnarvon-grown death nightshades you must sign a waiver to eat.

The rooster in charge is Drasko Jankovic, the multi-skilled former journo, *My Kitchen Rules* contestant and STM cover star who spent time on the pans and tweezers at Rene Redzepi's famed Copenhagen institution Noma. It was there he discovered his love of hot chook.

"There is something magic about turning a humble piece of chicken into an experience that brings tears of pleasure and pain in one mouthful," Jankovic, pictured, has said.

We chose the umami fries as the sidekick to a medium-strength Nashville quarter (\$18). They're chips, if you want to be pedantic, but they're bloody amazing. The chook is beautifully moist, remarkably ungreasy and perfectly seasoned.

There's no mash and gravy but Mama's Beans (\$7) are (I think) a nod to a Serbian prebranac or Macedonian tavec gravce and provide gorgeous homely, savoury goodness.

The 'sandos' and waffles have also gained cult status. Queue with the crowd behind the velvet rope for some of the finest dirty bird in town.

Postscript: I'd like to pay a public tribute to my precious friend, fried-chicken aficionado Dean Chatfield. Dean was hilarious and kind and erudite and better at most things than anyone you know. My husband made a gag about how Dean was a compassionate carpenter and philosopher who walked the earth and left way too soon and by God, if someone deified him, we'd join that church in a heartbeat.

Love to those who loved him. Vale.



DRASKO'S HOT CHICKEN

THE MEZZ, 148 SCARBOROUGH BEACH RD, MT HAWTHORN
PHONE 0451 921 319 WEB draskohotchicken.com.au
OPEN Thursday, 4-9pm; Friday to Sunday: Noon-3pm and 5-9pm
BOOKINGS NO LICENSED NO (BYO)

THE VERDICT

This is the hottest joint in town doing chook that will leave you shook. Local ingredients are showcased in a fun eatery that will set your soul aflame.

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10

1-2 THE LESS SAID THE BETTER 3-4 CONSIDER TAKEAWAY INSTEAD
5-6 WORTH A VISIT BUT NO RUSH 7-8 AN ABSOLUTE GEM
9-10 A FOODIE'S RITE OF PASSAGE