

*Upping-the-Ante*  
on Dining at...





# CYPRESS LAKES

**WORDS** Michelle Meehan

It's known internationally as Australia's best golf hotel, but it's not just the fairways and greens of the championship course that are making an impression on visitors to **Oaks Cypress Lakes Resort**.

Nestled in the Hunter Valley's picturesque hinterland surroundings of Pokolbin and located just two hours' drive north of Sydney, **Oaks Cypress Lakes Resort** offers the ultimate holiday, wedding, conferencing, events and golfing destination.

The resort was built on a stunning 25-acre property at the heart of one of Australia's oldest wine growing regions in 1992, with an 18-hole course designed by Steve Smyers of Florida.

With its challenging layout, superb associated leisure facilities and 136 on-site villas, it wasn't long before Cypress Lakes developed a reputation as one of Australia's premier resort courses.

More than a quarter of a century later the resort is still making its mark in the tourism industry, having been crowned Australia's best golf hotel for the last two consecutive years at the prestigious World Golf Awards.

Much of its recent success is due to the investment of the internationally renowned Minor Hotels group, which took ownership of the resort through its Australian entity Oaks Hotels and Resorts in 2013.

Since then the resort has been undergoing a major refurbishment program, which has seen millions of dollars poured into upgrading its villa accommodation, championship golf course, conference and events facilities and common areas.

A renewed focus on the resort's hospitality offerings has also seen Oaks Cypress Lakes Resort up the ante on dining.

Guests, golfers and other visitors can choose from two premier food and beverage establishments: **Oak & Vine Bar** or **Cypress Lakes Bar & Bistro**.

Open for dinner service from Wednesday to Saturday, Oak & Vine is a stunning and intimate dining venue committed to place, respectful of history and dedicated to local producers, offering enticing entrees such as the beetroot and vodka cured salmon, mouth-watering mains including the hearty oven roasted lamb rump and a range of decadent desserts.

The Bar & Bistro is a more relaxed affair, offering a casual dining destination and social bar setting where golf members, resort guests and locals can celebrate long afternoons enjoying time with family and friends.

Opening daily from noon to 9pm, the all-day bistro menu is full of comfort food favourites, from grilled fish tacos and slow cooked crispy pork belly to the traditional BLT or Cypress beef and bacon burger.

Finally, there is the newest addition to the resort's food and beverage fold, Oak & Vine Bar, which is fast establishing itself as one of the best whiskey bars in the Hunter Valley.

Offering the opportunity to relax amongst its earthy, wooden inspired décor and enjoy one of many different whiskies from around the world, plus exotic cocktails and delicious gins, the bar is open Thursday to Saturday from 6pm.

Among the team leading the resort's dining evolution is newly promoted Executive Chef **Praveen Leelavathy**.

An award-winning chef with impeccable credentials, Praveen joined Oaks Cypress Lakes in October 2018 as the Executive Sous Chef, before being promoted to the lead role last month.

Born and raised in southern India, Praveen began his hospitality journey by initially training in Hotel Management before making the transition into the kitchen, inspired in part by the career of his uncle, Suresh Kumar, who was an executive chef in Dubai.

He soon moved to the United Arab Emirates to join his uncle at the Four Points by Sheraton, before progressing his career at a number of other luxury hotel chains across Dubai, including the Kempinski Hotels, Address Hotels and Resorts, and the Marriott International.

Praveen spent 13 years honing his skills in Dubai, working across a wide range of restaurants and dining establishments including a stint as a speciality chef for At.mosphere Burj Khalifa. Located on the 122nd floor of the world's tallest building, it is the peak of fine dining in Dubai, both figuratively and literally.

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He was a regular participant in the renowned Emirates International Salon Culinare competitions, where he was twice named runner-up in the Chef of the Year category and also won more than ten gold, silver and bronze medals in categories ranging from the five-course gourmet dinner menu and live cooking beef to savoury tart plated and four-course vegetarian menu.

Praveen said his experiences in Dubai and the high calibre of chefs that he worked with and was trained by, including Dwayne Cheer and Jason Oakley, helped develop him into the chef he is today.

"There was no plan for me to become a chef, I had something else in my mind, and then it was in the early 2000s I was reading and seeing the executive chefs' high profile pictures, and lifestyle in magazines and on the internet, and I became fascinated," Praveen said.



“ My mum’s brother, my uncle, was an executive chef at that time, he had a very good career through hard work and dedication, and he was one of my inspirations to be in this industry now and where I am today.

"I worked with a lot of different chefs (in Dubai), who all came from different parts of the world, from Italy, from France, from Germany, from Greece, almost every part of the world. I worked with Michelin star chefs, I worked with chefs from all different places, and so I got exposure and experience from them."

In October last year, Praveen fulfilled a long-held dream to move to Australia, joining the team at Oaks Cypress Lakes. He said the Hunter Valley had been a change of pace for himself and his wife Anupriya, but they love the region's community feel, which has also provided an unexpected incentive to be at his best.

"I always wanted to be an Executive Chef, that was my goal, and moving to Australia was also one of my dreams because it's a beautiful country, with great producers, great chefs and great restaurants to explore," he said.

"Moving to the Hunter Valley has proved to be very different to city life, the Hunter Valley is much quieter and without the hustle and bustle that comes with a city lifestyle.

"It's also a small community, so people really talk; if you are good at what you do then everyone knows that and if you are bad, well then everyone knows that too. So there is a real incentive to continuously improve and to keep that positive reputation.

"With a community such as this, there are also always people willing to support you; the locals, people who work in the vineyards, the winemakers and management are also all very supportive, so it's really good to be in this part of the Hunter Valley and at Cypress Lakes."

Being a part of the community is also important to Praveen, who is keen to ensure that the menus at Oaks Cypress Lakes support local producers and reflect the seasonal offerings. ►



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Pictured Right: Shaun O'Bryan



"I always go to the local farmers' market every Sunday to see what the producers have on offer, and we have a small garden (at Oaks Cypress Lakes), so I'm trying to incorporate a few of the things from the garden into what I'm producing."

Community is also at the heart of the direction being taken by another new member of the Oaks Cypress Lakes team – **Shaun O'Bryan**.

Having spent 18 years working in the United States across various Ritz-Carlton properties, including several luxury golf and spa resorts, Shaun returned to his homeland of Australia last May, before being appointed as General Manager of Oaks Cypress Lakes Resort in January this year.

"What I've learnt in these destinational markets is that the business has to become a pillar of the community, a resort of the community," he said.

"You've got to focus as much on bringing people to the Hunter Valley and collaborating with some of the other businesses and the associations, as you do on collaborating with and fitting into the local community. You have to be involved in the local community, you have to support events and issues and different philanthropy efforts and environmentally friendly efforts, and be a good business of the community.

"I believe (Cypress Lakes) did a good job of that in the past, but I think we can do a much better job in the future and that's part of my strategy and focus as well.

“ We're really pushing here to drive local business and be a place that people will think about, not that it's a resort that they can't just come and have a beer or a meal at. We want them to feel welcome; it can be just like your local hangout place, your local watering hole, your local restaurant for special occasions or your local bistro restaurant.

Aside from the focus on using local produce on the menu, Shaun said Oaks Cypress Lakes was also dedicated to supporting the local wine region, with "99 per cent" of the wine available at the resort being sourced from the Hunter Valley. ■

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