

## Back to Basics in South Australia and Oak Park

*We're seeing a return to the quality of fundamental ingredients*

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Mulloway at Skillogalee, courtesy David Hammond



By **David Hammond**

When I think back to the best meals of 2011, one



**Marion Street Cheese Market**

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that stands out is a simply prepared fish I ate in the south of Australia. It was at Skillogalee, a small winery restaurant with a B&B, situated pretty much “in the middle of nowhere” (though that location description would apply to many of the places we visited in South Australia).



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Our meal at Skillogalee was stupendously simple: a baked Mulloway (local fish) with rice and salad, roasted carrots with cheese, and wine.

When the basic ingredients are spectacular, they don't require a lot of culinary fireworks to get my attention.

In Chicagoland, during the last eight years or so, we've seen the ascendance of “molecular gastronomy,” an increasingly more common kind of kitchen magic that transforms vegetables to foam and meat to gas through the use of anti-griddles, centrifuges and ovens that heat food using nothing more than sound waves.

At the moment, there seems to be a general reaction against this culinary slight-of-hand and a tendency for new restaurants to become less “chef-driven” and more “ingredients-driven,” putting an emphasis upon the wonderfulness of basic foods rather than the ways chefs can intervene and alter the fundamental goodness of natural products.

In Oak Park, Marion Street Cheese Market Café is probably the best example of how a chef's creativity can be used to deftly and subtly enhance high-quality ingredients in a way that foregrounds the fundamental integrity of the raw materials. At the Café, Chef Leonard Hollander – though he's always the creative intelligence behind his menu – doesn't mess with the inherent goodness of his ingredients, letting them “speak for themselves” by restraining what must be every chef's urge to modify nature.

In South Australia, the unadulterated deliciousness of the natural products is what struck me most about the simple meal I enjoyed at Skillogalee. The fish looked like fish and the carrots, carrots. That may not seem like a huge feat, but in a time when food had been starting to look less and less like what is, it's a welcome change.

Fortunately, we in the Midwest, like those in South Australia, live in a region where we're fortunate enough to have an abundance of good raw materials, beautiful produce, well-raised meat and dairy. Putting those excellent products on the plate, with less intervention, is a welcome trend – and it's a way of cooking (perhaps more accurately, shopping!) that's within reach of many of us.