

polēpolē
Jamie First

Tucked away amidst the hustle and bustle of office workers, shoppers and tourists is a new, hole-in-the-wall bar and kitchen – blink and you'll miss it.

A bright red door between two retail outlets in Little Collins St and 25 steps up a steep staircase leads one from the heart of Melbourne to deepest, darkest Africa.

Specialising in food from the east of the continent, polēpolē takes its name from a Swahili word that means to go slowly or take it easy, and that's just what you're invited to do here.

Owners Jeanelle and Dean Mariani travelled through Africa for four months before starting the business in late August.

Big windows allow you to look out and soak up the atmosphere while you have a leisurely meal or brew.

When you first enter, what hits you is a black and white picture of a proud, young African woman, complete with headscarf.

The walls and floors have been stripped back to their original state, with raw materials such as concrete, bricks and sanded floorboards predominating.

Behind the bar, recycled timber, assembled like a jigsaw puzzle, is a standout.

While most of the walls are burnt orange in colour, representing striking African sunsets, you can't miss a lone Acacia tree painted on a feature wall by local artist David Pereira.

It can accommodate up to 190 standing, but seats 70.

You can take your pick of cocktail tables and stools, low-rise drum-like padded rests or more intimate booths.

Rather than nuts and pretzels, the bar menu is nothing if not exotic.

Made for sharing, it encourages a hands-on approach, with knives and forks optional.

My partner and I started with sticky chicken ribs (\$16), one of their specialties.

Soft and tender, and bright orange from dukkah seasoning, it arrived on a bed of honey and sesame sauce, perfectly complementing the spicy chicken.

Next up was delicious, melt-in-your-mouth smoked pork ribs (\$18), which literally fell off the bone after 14 hours of slow cooking.

It was characterised by a strong cinnamon flavour, offset by the freshness of fennel.

We needed a drink in hand for the pork cigars with lava salt (\$10), which were served in a white ash-tray-like bowl and had an uncanny resemblance to a real stogie.

Our meals were accompanied by a couple of signature cocktails, including the Mzungu Martini (\$16), a smooth mixture of spiced rum, Amarula and espresso, with the latter the dominant flavour.

The Fizzy Furaha (\$18), from the Swahili word for joy, made from gin, Aperol, sage, lemon and honey, is an invigorating, fruity summery blend.

The sweet Savanna Dry cider (\$8.50) is also one not to be missed.

You can feel even better downing it because a portion of the profits from it, and the other African cider, along with seven African beers go to two charities (YGAP and Women for Women in Africa) that help impoverished youth and families.

If that's not your style, local wines and beers are available too.

Jeanelle and Dean Mariani are planning to add a high-end cocktail lounge on the second floor of polēpolē in 2015.

Hours: Sun – Thurs: 4pm till 11pm
 Fri – Sat: 4pm till 1am

Price: Affordable
 Food from \$5 to \$18
 Drinks from \$8 to \$18

Food: Hands-on, made for sharing

Vibe: Friendly, informal