

REVIEW

Wychwood Inn

TOBY HAMBLY

The perennial challenge for any pub that serves food is balance. A lot of gastropubs feel like restaurants with a bar attached, with only the faintest nod to the original idea of a public house. It's not an easy thing to get right. If any one element is given too much emphasis then the whole place can feel out of kilter, and if said gastropub also has rooms and is in a small, tight-knit village, then overcoming this challenge is all the more crucial.

The Wychwood Inn, I am happy to report, skates over these potential pitfalls with all the grace of Torvill and Dean. When I went along on a Friday evening, the bar was fully propped up by regulars of all stripes – the atmosphere was alive with that intangible sense of 'thank god it's Friday'. We were led past those toasting the weekend into one of the dining areas, opting for a table next to the doors that opened out onto the garden. The flow of the room is carefully and cleverly orchestrated with a combined sense of openness and privacy. Thick columns separate different areas and prevent undue noisiness which I imagine to be a significant benefit on louder nights for diners and for those staying overnight.

The first thing we were offered was homemade spelt bread with marmite butter. Here I must confess a bias. My grandmother on my father's side bakes her own bread. Eating marmite on toast in her Welsh farmhouse is a memory so firmly lodged in my hippocampus that the arrival of a simple plate of warm bread and butter had me feeling like a giddy five-year-old. To top it off I was eating with my father who was similarly enthralled as we shared in this little saunter down memory lane. I then relied on him for a more seasoned eye to cast over the wine list. His report: impressive variety and surprisingly affordable. My stepmother would approve – high praise indeed.

I started with a dish of crispy beef shin while across the table were prawns with aioli and pickled cucumber. The aioli didn't pack the sort of punch that I, as a member of GAA (Garlic Addicts Anonymous), would have hoped for, but was necessitated by the overall balance of the plate. The beef shin was a textural delight. The meat was soft, juicy and unctuous whilst its coating had a satisfying crunch avoiding

the oiliness that can sometimes hamper such morsels. The real winner was the pickled cucumber – the perfect balance of acidity and sweetness, complementing the prawns perfectly.

Our waiter, Laura, was very knowledgeable about the menu and the wine list, recommending pairings for my father's main course, steak, and mine, calf's liver and bacon. One gets the sense at The Wychwood Inn that their staff retention is better than at most places, perhaps aided by its location – there seemed to be a cordial back and forth between bar, floor and kitchen.

Finishing up, both of us would have much preferred to sidle up to the bar and try an ale from North Cotswold Brewery or a G&T from a local distillery. Alas, we had to head back to town – I am reliably informed that operating a motor vehicle under the influence of alcohol is frowned upon in law, and I think it's quite a long walk from Shipton-under-Wychwood to Oxford. You always have the option of staying the night with them and all reviews I've read of the accommodation are as glowing as mine is here. The Wychwood Inn is a brilliantly balanced venue – the pub's dainty dance over all potential potholes gives me faith that the Great British pub has legs in it yet.



"The Wychwood Inn is a brilliantly balanced venue"



REVIEW

The Feathered Nest

JACK RAYNER



We are far from short of high-quality inns in Oxfordshire, and over the last few years I've had the privilege to have eaten in most of them. Beautiful countryside, a wealth of historic pubs and the availability of local produce of unparalleled quality mean that it's not difficult, when compared to many other areas, to provide an enjoyable experience at one of these establishments. However, some are plainly a cut above the others, and The Feathered Nest is one of the very best. I'm not going to pretend to practice some sort of journalistic objectivity here – the place is nothing short of spectacular.

Views across the picturesque rolling hills from Nether Westcote towards Icomb and Bledington set the scene for head chef Kuba Winkowski's preposterously ambitious and phenomenally well executed menu. An alumnus of Le Manoir aux Quat' Saisons, his cooking displays a level of confidence and artistry that you might expect from Raymond Blanc's Great Milton flagship, but that blows most of his 'Cotswold country pub' competition out of the water.

Kuba air-dries, smokes, cures and ages an entire delicatessen's worth of charcuterie and fish himself, which is put to use across many of the dishes here. His wild boar prosciutto and rich salamis introduce the tasting menu in remarkable style, but the real highlight from Kuba's meaty portfolio is the pork rind – translucent, salty and wickedly indulgent, I'd opt to smother all bread with this gorgeous product at any opportunity if my arteries could handle the abuse.

Onto the menu proper, striking presentation and deft

balance of flavour is faultlessly demonstrated. A sliver of cured salmon is brought to life with a trio of multicoloured beetroots, dill and caviar. A rich, tender sweetbread carries assertive depth without straying towards becoming overpowering, and an obscenely large scallop is draped with more of that air-dried ham, the flavours elevated with a sweet-sour hit of vinegary escabeche. This is smart, assured cooking laced with just enough of Kuba's Polish heritage to provide a fabulous reimagining of the 'modern British' formula.

This is not cheap food, by any stretch of the imagination, but neither should it be. The kitchen brigade are not attempting to oversell run-of-the-mill produce with

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'modernist' appearance – some of the ingredients chosen are wickedly indulgent and treated with devoted affection. One of the most memorable courses is a carpaccio of sika venison, capers, parmesan crisp and a 25-year-old balsamic, pulling off a kind of harmony to put the finest Welsh male voice choir to shame.

Given the kind of praise I'm lavishing on The Feathered Nest, you could be forgiven for assuming that the atmosphere is stuffy, the waiting staff overbearing and the process convoluted. However, despite the wizardry going on in the kitchen, this is still a pub and still feels like a pub. Locals chat over drinks in the garden, cask ales are served at an entirely reasonable price, and there is very little in the way of pretention or overbearing self-opinion. A remarkable achievement – if you're looking to really treat yourself in the coming months, there are few places in the area I'd recommend higher. I'll be back for more of that pork rind by the end of the week.