

The View review

Rosemary Staal finds a Frenchman whose joy in his work is infectious



Gastro Bistro at the Pheasant Inn • 19 Salt Lane • Salisbury • Wiltshire • SPI IDT • 01722 414926 • www.gastrobistro.co.uk

Another month, another restaurant that used to be a corner pub. Last month it was Winchester, this month finds me and D in our other cathedral city, Salisbury.

The historic Pheasant Inn, on the corner of Salt Lane and Rollestone Street, dates back to 1694 and has a plethora of beautiful old beams to show for it. There are creaky wood floors upstairs, too, where weddings and frequent children's parties frighten off any ghosts and merriment comes courtesy of a clown. He's a clever clown, a Marcel Marceau doppelgänger, at other times to be found in a different guise as Arnaud Rochette, founder and owner of Gastro Bistro, the restaurant downstairs, which is our destination.

Arnaud, who comes from the Champagne region of France, took over the Pheasant last year and transformed it into this stylish, cool fusion of ancient and modern interior décor.

The old Pheasant remains, but only as a sort of sub-title: Gastro Bistro at the Pheasant Inn is the official name Arnaud gives to his enterprise, which he launched a year ago. He loves England, he tells us, and has enjoyed making his home in Salisbury for the past seven years. His move to set up business on his own was precipitated by the untimely death of local legend Rupert Willcocks, with

whom he worked at the Haunch of Venison, across the other side of the Market Square.

Arnaud has brought with him one of the chefs from that successful venture, 26-year-old local boy Mark Hawkins, who, like so many of the good chefs we are encountering on our View Review travels, did his college training at Southampton. Two of the waiting staff also made the short journey across the centre of the city to work for the enthusiastic, ebullient Frenchman, and I can hardly blame them. He must be fun to work with. They all appear to be as jolly as he is, with laughter quick to break out from under their courteous and efficient exterior.

We are here to sample the newly launched autumn menu. Arnaud describes the food as 'classic English with a French twist' and so D and I are eager to discover for ourselves just what he means by that.

A glance at the menu gives a clue for we discover such delights as 'green lip muscles' and 'Keltic hand-dived scallops'. If spellings such as those aren't French twists on English classics then *je ne sais quoi*.

D chooses the 'Keltic' scallops, which come with cauliflower puree and pancetta, and pronounces them quite perfect. I had hoped to pinch a scallop for myself, because I do so

love them, but I'm too busy enjoying my roasted onion and cider soup. Having eaten nothing but an apple in the past 24 hours, I am unable to resist a taster dish of one of the other starters, too: courgette beignets with spicy tomato and coriander salsa, which are as lovely as they look.

Loin of Dorset lamb follows for D. He is very impressed with this, though wishes he'd ordered a side dish to augment the modest portions of accompanying garlic pomme puree and chopped root vegetables.

I have no need of extras with my main dish, a tasty and very filling goat's cheese, red pepper and butternut squash lasagne with tomato and shallot salad. It certainly deals with any residual hunger pangs and I much enjoy the different flavours and textures, not to mention the lovely colours in each layer.

Among the desserts we see spotted dick and custard, which of course is classic English, and beneath it an intriguing French twist: apple and calvados mousse. D and I can't resist the mousse so have one each, rounding off our meal with a clean, fresh palate-cleanser that brings to mind those spectacular Normandy apple orchards. D's recollections are rather more influenced by a memorable visit he once made to the Calvados distillery – but that's another story.

Finally we are replete. We have eaten well from a most interesting à la carte menu, which we learn always features fresh fish of the day. Gastro Bistro also offers a most tempting Monday-to-Saturday lunchtime menu when for only £7 you can get burgers and fries, or crayfish or spinach risotto, or bangers and mash, or that great classic of the Continent, moules marinières and chips. Sorry, French fries. Pardon my English.

Our three-course meal for two, excluding drinks: £45 **V**



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