

The View review

Rosemary Staal *is impressed by great food at a modest price*



North Walls Bar & Restaurant • 71 North Walls • Winchester • SO23 8DA • 01962 827779 • www.thenorthwalls.co.uk

The corner shop is sadly no longer a traditional feature of our townscapes. Likewise, increasingly, pubs the length and breadth of the land are falling victim to the nation's changing habits.

The old Foresters Arms, on the corner of North Walls and Parchment Street in Winchester, is one of them. However, its handsome structure has been spared the ignominy of being turned into flats or a Tesco Metro and instead it's been revived and transformed into a bar and restaurant.

Now that may sound as though it's still a pub but it offers a proper menu, as in 'move over pork scratchings and cheese and pickle sandwiches and hello pasta bake and blackcurrant cheesecake'.

Do not be mistaken: this is as far removed from a pub menu as you could wish to get – and many of us would wish that to be a considerable distance. The North Walls, as it has been called since its rebirth six months ago, offers a fine dining menu, skilfully put together by Simon Smith, a chef who is excitingly motivated by his work.

When D and I call in for dinner, Simon is engaged in an impressive and heroic solo act in the kitchen (12 hours a day, five days a week, in fact) yet when he emerges to head off home for his evening meal, cooked by someone else, incidentally, he is smiling, relaxed and looking ten times healthier than any chef I've ever seen.

His secret, we discover, is his absolute joy in being back working in a kitchen again. 'I'm really fired up,' he tells us. 'I so want this place to succeed – and it really deserves to.' Simon pays tribute to his fellow workaholics at North Walls, brothers Richard and Alex Tolfree, who not only help him with the washing-up but manage every other aspect of the place. 'We work so well together and have a great time. It's

a very good place to be,' Simon adds.

Being head-hunted to take over the kitchen at North Walls meant Simon had to suspend his work as a landscape and garden designer. That had been his third career. He'd initially trained and worked in antiques restoration. In between, he turned to cooking and, after



training, worked in a number of kitchens here and abroad before going to the Masons Arms in Branscombe, Devon, where he covered himself and the gastro-pub in glory, honours, awards and rosettes. Thus garlanded, he quit and turned his attentions to gardens. 'I just fancied a change,' he says, as if that explains such a giant leap.

His return to cooking may bring him pleasure, but believe me it brings us sheer delight. He is very, very good and Winchester is extraordinarily lucky to him have in its midst.

Food is served at lunchtime with a bar menu and in the evenings with a very attractive choice of six, seven and six for each course. One look round the place makes us feel confident we're in for a treat. It is a happy blend of modern and traditional, with plain

wood tables, comfortably upholstered chairs, lots of cream paint, fawn carpet and black slate tiles, and, thank you very much, proper damask napkins for us diners.

And so we get on with the business of choosing. For me: grilled goat's cheese (Simon sits it on a puddle of olive oil when he grills it, giving it its own crisp little bottom, oh glory be) and sautéed of mushroom and leek stroganoff with sticky jasmine rice. Verdict: sublime, utterly wonderful. I want to shout from the rooftops how fabulous it is, and then cry when it's over.

For D: Scottish oak-smoked salmon with lime vinegar dressing, followed by pan-seared lamb's liver (the little fellow had a short but happy life down the road at Romsey, we learn) with red onion jus, crispy bacon lardons and mustard mash. Verdict: The same as mine, though naturally without the emotional overtones.

We are in the thrall of this chef, so we have to see what he does with puddings. Of course we're not disappointed. I have baked lemon tart with lemon sorbet and D has sticky toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce.

With food as good as that, and offering such astonishingly good value, it is unsurprising that North Walls gets packed out on Fridays and Saturdays. Oh you lucky people. **V**

Three-course dinner for two, excluding drinks: £45.

