

The Fox and Hounds

Over in Llancaiwan, there's good craft beer, gorgeous, modestly-priced food (pheasant and bacon pie? Mmm...) and spectacular puds to die for – what's not to like?

By ZOE AUSTIN

For a number of years The Fox and Hounds in Llancaiwan was one of my regular haunts for a glass of wine on a summer's evening or a Sunday lunch after a breezy walk on the Glamorgan coast. Somehow, it fell off my radar, so I was glad of the opportunity to re-visit, especially now that it's in the hands of chef James Milward, whose pedigree can't be faulted – the two Michelin-star Champignon Sauvage in Cheltenham, the award-winning Kingham Plough in the Cotswolds, and the popular Felin Fach Griffin, near Brecon.

Getting out of the car on this autumn evening, a full moon illuminated the tower of St Cadoc's church, and the only sound to be heard was the river rushing by. Yet, despite this 'deep in the heart of the country' feel, the Fox and Hounds is only a 20-minute drive from the centre of Cardiff.

Once inside, it was clear that a transformation had taken place. The traditional, ubiquitous pub carpet had gone, replaced by wooden floors and unfussy tables and chairs that give a pared back feel. Despite its new life as a gastropub with rooms, it still strives to maintain its place as a village pub, with a bar where locals drink, and a wood-burning stove pumping out a welcoming warmth.

We had a couple of drinks in the bar before going through to the dining room, a decision that met with approval from my other half, as the pub serves craft beer. He chose a Caradog pale ale from the Grey

Trees brewery in Aberdare. And for me, a tonic water minus the gin – no prizes for guessing who drew the short straw in the driving stakes.

The meal opened with complementary home-made soda bread, served with rich, home-cultured butter that sank obligingly into each warm and wholesome slice. The bread vanished at speed, a coastal walk from Nash Point earlier in the day having fired up our appetites. A word of warning though: don't overdo the bread if it's going to stop you from eating pudding, more of which later.

An amuse bouche of pickled mackerel with a dash of horseradish, dill and beetroot accompanied the bread, an arrestingly and appealing combo that set the bar high for the rest of the meal.

Smoked eel, a long-standing favourite of mine, followed, partnered with apple puree and fragile slices of wafer thin

apple. And pigeon breast, too, cosying up to earthy girolles and beetroot, both dishes reflecting seasonal produce. Other options included a pumpkin velouté with toasted seeds, walnut and Perl Las cheese; oxtail lasagne with celeriac, truffle and girolles; and ham hock with Guinness, pickled onion, pear and pork scratchings.

For mains, I was torn between the haunch of venison with cobnuts, Jerusalem artichoke and potted cabbage, or the pheasant and bacon pie. After an internal wrangle, the pheasant won. With its perfect pastry, sleek, buttery greens and creamy mash, it ticked all the boxes, as did the fragrant sauce that coated the meat. A delve into my opposite number's main revealed a moist piece of pork loin and caramelised belly, brimming with flavour, nudged along with cider, and sitting comfortably alongside a generous helping of dauphinoise potato, with the ruby gleam of red cabbage providing the accent colour.

Vegetarians could happily tuck into a main course of wild mushroom arancini with pumpkin, cavolo nero and parmesan, and flying the flag for fish was home-salted cod with an exotic smattering of ras-el-hanout.

Having seen the puddings arrive on an adjacent table earlier in the evening, my mind was already made up – it was the spectacular-looking banana soufflé or bust. James brought it to the table, towering above the pudding bowl, a soft, light confection, dusted with icing sugar and begging to be demolished. If you think you are not a pudding person, then the soufflé might provide you with a road to Damascus moment. My other half, generally someone who can take or leave a pudding, dug in repeatedly. He also rated his choice of pannacotta with buttermilk, raspberry and a genius addition of honeycomb.

Had I booked a room, I might have ordered a pudding wine such as the 2013 Sauternes Les Garonelles (Lucien et Fils, France), or a malt whisky. As it was, a caffeine hit provided by a robust double espresso set me up for the drive home, along with gorgeous home-made petits fours.

The food at the Fox and Hounds is doubtlessly a head and shoulders above the average gastropub, and it's obvious that shortcuts are not in James Milward's nature. What's more, the relatively modest pricing really does not reflect the quality of the cooking.

If fabled food critic Jay Rayner has had it with the foodie scene in Cardiff, maybe he should go to The Fox and Hounds for some culinary rehab. And if he chooses not to, there's nothing stopping you... **CL**

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DINING DETAILS The Fox and Hounds, Llancaiwan, Vale of Glamorgan CF62 3AD Tel: 01446 781287, fandhllancaiwan.co.uk **Opening times** Closed Mon & Tues (bar open from 6pm – bar snack menu available); Weds-Sun, 12–2.30pm (Sun until 3pm), 6–9pm (Sun – bar snack menu only) **Prices** À la carte starters from £6, mains from £13, puds £6.50; winter dining set menu, two courses £14, three courses £17.50; Sunday lunch: two courses £18, three courses £22.50 **Rooms** Dinner, B&B from £105 **Vegetarian choice** Thoughtful dishes, properly crafted with veggies in mind; special dietary requirements and food intolerances catered for **Drinks list** Wine priced to suit a wide range of pockets; craft beers served **Service/atmosphere** Relaxed, easy-going atmosphere and friendly service