

All wheat and no chaff

Why the wonderful Wheatsheaf has been luring me back for six years



TOM PARKER

BOWLES
TOM'S TABLE

The Wheatsheaf

West Road, Northleach, Cheltenham, 01451 860244



There are few dishes quite so splendidly English as devilled kidneys on toast. It's where the blazing fire of the St James's club meets the limpid, spice-scented breeze of Empire, comfort food with a dominatrix-crack of cayenne, nursery grub with the lusty nudge of the politely improper. Mixing the parsimony of offal with the pleasures of toast, these feisty lobes are as welcome at breakfast, lunch or dinner.

Or simply taken as a savoury, that gloriously salty and piquant intermission traditionally eaten after the main course which, in the words of food writer Ambrose Heath, 'has the last word, as it were, before we turn to the frivolities of dessert'. But the devilled kidneys sitting plump and pert before me tonight are not bringing up the dinner's rear, rather providing the advance guard. A

starter at The Wheatsheaf in Northleach, and damned good they are too. The kidneys are beautifully fresh, and beautifully cooked, a pert blushing pink. There's a whack of mustard, a kick of chilli, and the very faintest whiff of the farmyard. All those wonderful juices mix and melt into the thick slice of proper brown toast. The sort of grub you want to eat on a damp, drab and dreary January's night, in an expensively scruffy pub where logs hiss and crackle in the grate, and pints of Old Hookey gleam amber in the artfully crepuscular gloom.

We munch a half pint of prawns, mildly salty commas that taste of cool Atlantic breeze. And a double-baked cheese soufflé, sharp with decent cheddar, and a gentle honk of grain mustard, that

wobbles as you pierce it, then oozes, discreetly, into the buttery spinach sitting at its base.

Six years I've been coming here. For rosé-soaked al fresco summer lunches, and dimly lit winter dinners; for christenings, weddings and wakes. Because The Wheatsheaf is that rarest of pubs, a place so dependable that you can set your watch by it.

I know I'll eye up the Northleach pie, a local mix of mutton and apple, before deciding, just for a change, to order sirloin steak, cooked blue. I know it will be a fine piece of flesh, charred and cooked exactly as ordered, seasoned with salt, rather than a giddily gushing bovine biography. Here, they let the meat speak for itself.

I also know that the fries will be eternally slim, crisp and burnished, the green beans cooked

firm, but not squeakily underdone. In late spring, there'll be asparagus, a generous fistful. And as the nights draw in, you'll find briny native oysters, and game, roasted or stewed. Seasonal, carefully sourced ingredients. Without the usual breathy spiel about how sustainable and right-on they are. And what bitter, pee-stained and basically inedible weeds have been picked – sorry, 'foraged' – by some local bloke with a grotty beard and dodgy BO.

There's always a decently priced bottle of claret too, a great lump of well-kept Colston Bassett, or ripe, luscious Camembert. Despite the resolutely British feel of the place, the menu skips all over Europe. So soufflé sits next to smoked salmon, plum crumble alongside meringue.

Quietly Remain, rather than brutishly Brexit.

My best friend Ben lives a few miles away with his wife MC, who grew up nearby.

And The Wheatsheaf has become our dining default. 'You know,' he says, as we sip good espresso and pick at the last errant crumbs of Stilton, 'I think I've eaten at this restaurant more than any other in my life. Our whole marriage has been centred around these wooden tables. Incredible.'

He shakes his head, and smiles at MC. We pay up, wrap up and wander outside. The driving sleet has turned to freezing fog. My phone decides to pack up and die. And the car's heating is on the blink.

If only everything were as reliable as The Wheatsheaf Inn. Lunch for two: £60



Above: dining tables at The Wheatsheaf. Left: steak frites with watercress and confit garlic. Top: venison with parsnip ceps

WHAT TOM ATE THIS WEEK

SATURDAY

To the country, and a serious lunch of roast duck, in the most joyous of gravies. Plus roast potatoes and mounds of buttered cabbage.

SUNDAY

Roast chicken for lunch, then back to London. And Mexican lime

and chicken soup, with a hearty spoonful of chipotle salsa mixed in. Smoke, spice and succour.

MONDAY

I don't like Mondays. Unless, of course, I'm lunching at Bocca di Lupo.

Sea urchins with the faintest scent of roses, pork-stuffed olives, puntarelle with anchovy dressing, orecchiette with 'nduja, roast teal stuffed with herbs and Calabrese sausage. Wow. The very finest regional Italian winter tucker. And one of London's greatest Italian restaurants.

TUESDAY

Back to the purse-lipped lethargy of 5/2. Seaweed, Daylesford soup, handfuls of chillies. And a couple of portions of natto, that stinky, Japanese fermented soy bean that tastes of pure umami delight. Although millions may disagree.

