

In charm's way

The service couldn't be nicer, the decor is delightful – all in all the Devonshire Arms is a great neighbourhood find, says ZOE WILLIAMS

If you go into a pub at lunchtime and you're the only people in it you have a duty, I think, to close your eyes and imagine it full (it's different in the evening, of course: then your duty is to leave, and find a pub that people like). So, anyway, I imagine an elegant, young-thirties sort of crowd here, because Chiswick is swish but not insanely so. The service is exceedingly charming: I ordered a cheese course that was basically a ploughman's lunch, directly after his lunch, just on the waitress's say-so. The interior is pretty simple but deeply comfortable; it reminds me of how the pubs looked in *Hangover Square*, although of course then the food would have been terrible

because of the inexorable rise of fascism and that.

I had the Brixham mussels with bacon, cider and chive cream (£7.50), and they were tasty little blighters – not big show-off New Zealand creatures, but perfectly fleshy, very flavourful and with a beautiful silky texture that hollered of their freshness. I had the pressed pig's head terrine, with confit Jerusalem artichoke (£6.50) and what may have been the best pickled onions I've ever tasted. I can't stand a sweet pickle, normally,

finding it to be against nature; here the sweetness and vinegar were in an exquisite harmony. The flavour of the pig's head was great, with the opaque, intense artichoke nestling in the middle like a jewel; it was really gorgeous to look at. The meat itself is quite, erm, chewy, though, in a way that reminds you of how much connective tissue there is in a head. If you're the kind of meat-eater who likes to forget where meat comes from, this wouldn't be for you. But then I doubt you'd have ordered it.

I carried on with the smoked haddock and salmon fishcake (£12.50), at which I was exclaiming, 'My, that is some fishcake,' with a kind of judgmental awe, as if the sheer size of my outrageous appetite had conjured it up. It probably stood four inches in its stockinged feet. And while that wasn't my idea, I was glad of it, because it was delicious: all the nursery goodness of a fishcake, the extra capery excitement of the 'modern British' way, a perfect crumb and a hollandaise sauce that stole my heart (slathered it in butter, furred up all its apparatus, then gave it back, but never mind). I made J have the oxtail and rib cottage pie (£12.50), because it's not

often you find an oxtail in a pie, let alone a rib (such a pest to have to prise the bone out); he didn't regret it, or at least he didn't admit to regretting it. It was extremely rich; they're both so close to the bone, these cuts, they ascend to heights of meatiness that a mere steak could only dream of. I did wonder whether I'd have been tempted to mix things up a bit for light and shade – maybe replace the rib with... I don't know... a mushroom? I liked it well enough, but if it'd been mine I'd have felt overwhelmed. We had some honey-roast quince (£3.25) on the side; it was unusual and savoury, with a grainy texture (I would normally mean that as an insult, but here it was lovely).

The Cornish Smuggler (£8.50) was a mild but tangy cheese, with a dainty red marbling, like a cross between a mild cheddar and a wensleydale. The portion was way too large; it should be half the size and price. I had jam roly-poly with custard, chosen because it was apparently a direct lift from Mrs Beeton. You could taste the old-fashioned culinary sensibility, by which I mean it was as dense as a housebrick and you could eat it and then immediately be ready to fight a war. The custard had separated a bit, which isn't ideal, but didn't send me mad.

It didn't set my heart on fire, but it's a very sweet little place. ●

Devonshire Arms

126 Devonshire Road, London W4
(020 8742 2302)

Three courses: £26.38 Stella rating: ★★☆☆



Mark Whitefield, Pigeon

Sauce

No need to stand on ceremony with port, says SUSY ATKINS

Port drinkers fall neatly into two groups: the ones who are mesmerised by its generous, fruitcake-rich scents and intense, lingering flavours; and those who seem to delight rather more in the ceremony that surrounds it. You know, all that port etiquette – sediment searches by candlelight, extreme decanting, passing the blinking bottle to the left.

Just get on with it, I say, and treat port like any other wine.

TIPPLE TIP

THINK THE GEWURZ

'Spicy, sticky, sweetish meat dishes (like Chinese spare ribs) are brilliantly matched by off-dry, fruity whites. Try the new peachy, scented Yali National Reserva Gewürztraminer 2010, Chile (Majestic, £7.49, down to £5.99 until 30 January)

True, it's an especially strong and sweet one, having been fortified with spirit, so exercise caution, but, really, there's no need for any retro rigmarole. It might even distract from the glorious sensations ahead.

Red ports are aromatic, and should taste complex, with peppery, spicy kicks to plush cherry, plum and blackberry fruit. Avoid real cheapies and buy fine vintage port for

keeping, or single quinta (estate) wines in non-vintage years, or late-bottled vintage, somewhat simpler but good value. Red ports are served at room temperature, and only more mature, very serious examples need decanting so you can chuck the gritty dregs. Drink from normal wine glasses, with ginger cake, Christmas cake, unsalted nuts and hard cheeses.

Tawny ports, which slumber for decades in oak barrels, are amber-hued, smoother, without fiery fruit, instead glowing gently with citrus peel, mellow caramel, nut oils. They're even better for a light chill and make good partners for creamy coffee, chocolate or nutty puddings. Or soft cheeses. Pass it along – from any which way, but, please, in my direction.

TRY THESE...

Taylor's Late Bottled Vintage 2005 (widely available, £13.95) Superior LBV, delivering plenty of spiced red cherry and plum, seasoned with a good twist of black pepper. An excellent introduction for new port drinkers

Graham's Crusted, Bottled 2003 (Tesco, Sainsbury's, Morrison's, £17.99) 'Crusted' is a rarer creature, made from a blend of different years, but bottled together on a labelled date. This is robust and satisfying, and tastes like spiced fruitcake

Noval 20 Year Old Tawny (Waitrose, Tesco, £20 for 37.5cl) A sublime mature tawny, wonderfully mellow, with creamy toffee, brazils and hazelnuts that linger for ever. Great antidote to a miserable dark evening

COUNTY COUNSEL

CORNISH ARMS

Churchtown, St Merryn, Cornwall (01841 532700) You can't book, so turn up early at Rick Stein's gastropub to bag a table by the log-burning stove. The menu is reassuringly simple – a pint of prawns comes with a hunk of bread and mayo (£9.20), while grilled hake is served with mushy peas (£12)

SOMERSET ARMS

High Street, Semington, Wiltshire (01380 870067) The charcuterie platter (£14) served at this renovated pub features their own cured and smoked duck, chorizo and bresaola. Share between two before trying the rump of lamb with butternut squash, a rosemary drop scone and redcurrant jus (£17.50)

DURHAM OX

Westway, Crayke, North Yorkshire (01347 821506) A gem of a pub just down the hill from Crayke Castle. The bar area, with its claret-red walls and dark oak beams, is a cosy spot to enjoy the popular rib-eye steak with skinny chips, béarnaise sauce and a rocket salad (£19.95)