

Paolo Tullio: You'll be baying for more

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I've got to know the road to Athlone pretty well in the past few years because we've filmed 'The Restaurant' in Glasson's Wineport Lodge for the past five series. It used to be a bit of a trek using the old national road, but with the new motorway now open all the way to Galway, you can drive to Athlone from Dublin in just over an hour. Suddenly, the Midlands are in easy reach.

I was back again this week, not to Glasson but to the other side of Lough Ree, to review the restaurant of the Hodson Bay Hotel. Let me tell you why. One of my big surprises dining out last year was a meal in The Osprey Hotel in Naas. Somehow, I never expect much from hotel meals, but my dinner in The Osprey was really good. The chef was a man called Kevin Curran. Since I ate there, The Osprey has gone into receivership and Kevin has found a new job -- in the Hodson Bay. Knowing that a good chef was in the kitchen was enough to goad me into a drive to the Midlands.

I arrived at the Hodson Bay, accompanied by Marian Kenny, on a sunny evening, which allowed us our first view of its location. Set a little way back from the shore, the hotel has a fine view of the lake. By 8.30pm we were in the L'Escale dining room, which is their fine-dining restaurant and is Kevin's new showcase.

There's a set menu for dinner, priced at €39.50 for three courses and €31.50 for two. There's plenty of choice -- it listed nine starters and 11 main courses, so it took a while to make our decisions. I was torn between the Kettafi prawns served with chili jam and the smoked chicken tartlet, but then I learnt that the chef's special of the day was a crab salad, so I ordered that. Marian was vacillating between the feta cheese parcel, the salmon roulade and the duck salad but finally decided on the duck salad.

It says something for changing eating habits when you find a choice of four fish dishes in a Midland restaurant. Salmon, sea bass and cod were all on the menu, and the chef's special of the day was John Dory, which is what Marian ordered, asking for it plainly grilled with a slice of lemon. I'm in agreement with that: when you have a really fresh piece of fish, it really doesn't need any additional flavours -- let it taste of what it is. Of the meats there were steaks, lamb, pork, chicken, duckling and quail, and I decided on the stuffed boneless quail.

Next, I turned to the wine list. Usually hotel wine lists carry a higher mark-up than restaurant ones, but that isn't the case here. There are house wines for less than €20 and the remainder of the list is mostly between €20 and €30. For those willing to spend more, there are a couple of Gran Reservas from Spain -- the Faustino Primero 1998 for €46 and the Marques de Caceres 2001 for €49.50, either of which I'd drink with much pleasure. The Dom Perignon 2000 was the cheapest I've seen it at €158.50. What we ordered though, was a half bottle of Chablis, very well priced at €16.75.

With the decisions made, we started on the breads -- four different ones and all good. As ever, a big bottle of mineral water quenched my thirst before the starters arrived. As I had expected, both of the starters were well done, the salad nicely dressed and the pieces of duck breast that were mixed through it cooked perfectly. Crab salads can often end up not tasting much of crab, but this one had a delicious crab taste and it was served as a tian with a little garnish around the plate. The main courses arrived, the plates bearing just the main choice, the vegetables of the day being served separately. Marian had three fillets of John Dory, the skin side nicely crisped and the flesh succulent. My boned quail was served sliced on a bed of sautéed, shredded Savoy cabbage, which had been cooked with smoked bacon. I thought that the combination of cabbage, bacon and quail went well together.

We let a little time pass before we were able to think of desserts, but we did eventually order two: the crème brûlée with rhubarb and shortbread biscuits for Marian and the chocolate marquise for me. It was a pretty good crème brûlée, but the chocolate marquise was liver-crippingly good. I did, however, refrain from eating it all. We finished with a tea and espresso, which brought the bill to €108.50.

The next morning, Marian checked out the spa, and returned positively glowing. "Probably the best spa I've been to," was her assessment. Not being a spa person, I took a trip on a very fast covered rib around Lough Ree with Richie O'Hara, circumnavigating Hare Island, stopping off on Friar's Island and doing a quick spin past The Glasson Golf Hotel and The Wineport Lodge. On a sunny day, this was simply a joy.

- Paolo Tullio

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