

There are those in life who grit their teeth and pretend to be overjoyed with a handful of seeds and a cardboard-y crispbread.

They draw tiny shivers of comfort from the thought that they might keep death at bay a little longer with the limp thrash of a stick of celery, the vague waft of an alfalfa sprout.

I think their lives just feel longer. A lot longer. What comfort can be drawn from such joyless dietary smugness?

At the other end of the spectrum are those for whom good food runs through life like a stick of rock. Picture these people. They're smiling, aren't they?

There is something so direct and joyful about truly fantastic food. It's a celebration of being human, of freedom of choice, of friendship and kinship and taste and sensation and the beguiling spin of a good few glasses of wine.

If you are a foodie, put down the delectable morsel you have in your hand right now and pick up the phone instead. You need to make a booking at The Plough. Not tomorrow, not next week, not for your birthday, but *now*.

The Plough celebrates food. It picks up ingredients and waltzes them round the restaurant, to the applause of the crowd. Chef Grant Hawthorne has a passion for food that's as clear as consomme and when he's not in the kitchen, cooking up a storm, he's working the room, getting to know the customers and their culinary hotspots; the way they like their meat cooked, the dishes that make their hearts flutter with anticipation.

It's a baptism into the church of fine dining. The Golfer and I took a pew...

First out was the dish that has secured Grant a place on Restaurant Magazine's shortlist for the Best Dishes of 2007. The Roasted Butternut and Carrot soup is a happy medley of clean flavours, warming the heart and the palate.

Hot on its heels was tuna medallions, marinated yellow fin, served bitingly fresh, keeping all its texture and flavour.

The pork cheek had that *melting* quality (Foodies, you know what I'm talking about. Crispbread-eaters, have another rice cake).

The Golfer and I were sharing each dish and suddenly we seemed possessed by the spirit of Lindford Christie, poised at the starting line, the plate hitting the table and...we were off! Knives and forks clashed together as we very politely tusselled. In over two years of doing

restaurant reviews together, the battle, though muted, has never been so fierce. Now *that's* a compliment to the chef...

With each dish, glasses of wine appeared like magic and - drumroll - simply vanished with some very basic sleight of hand. Organic wines are a speciality and make that tempting promise of a big drink with a tiny hangover (no so many chemicals, you know).

Main courses, too, are a masterclass in making a happy marriage of ingredients. Grilled John Dory with aubergine puree, Anya potatoes, olive and tomato positively yodelled with flavour. The Woburn venison was cooked 'en sous-vide' (it's a fancy-pants way of saying boil in the bag: the meat is cooked for a long time at a low temperature and all the flavour is kept inside the bag). Served with a celeriac puree and port jus, the meat melted in the mouth. I ate mouthfuls while watching the Golfer's plate, looking for the moment when he consumed one iota more than his half-share...

The restaurant's cheese plate is also in line to win an award and with no less than 15 British cheeses on offer (including one called, intriguingly, Rachel), I would be (e)dam-ned if they don't win it. The cheeses were served with a fruity little homemade ginger-spiked watermelon preserve and a selection of sherries, one of which was older than me. Putting my preconceptions of tottering Christmas aunties aside, I was instantly charmed, nay *seduced*, by the rich, oaky aroma and necked it down. I mean, sipped it, in an extremely ladylike fashion.

Which might be why the desserts passed in a slight blur. Apologies. I remember a chocolate fondant that, when poked with a spoon, spilled its white chocolate secret, and an apple cake, light as a cloud, and the Golfer's delighted face when I leant back in my chair and waved the white flag of culinary surrender and he got to polish off the lot.

Outside, in the award-winning garden, we were sit-com replete, all satisfied sighs and loosening buttons and belts. Foodie bliss. And the icing on the cake, the irresistible cherry on the top is that The Plough offers customers a chauffeur service. They can pick you up, dine you until you are dizzy, then take you home, clutching your undone trousers and smiling like a wide-eyed, contented convert to a new religious sect. Praise be to food!

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