



Ryebeck Country House

Plates of Creativity

On some plates, food and art intersect. Giselle Whiteaker tests her taste buds at The Ryebeck Country House and Restaurant in Bowness-on-Windermere.



ying in a leafy clearing above the shores of Lake Windermere, The Ryebek Country House and Restaurant is a beautiful, unpretentious country house with an informal, friendly atmosphere. In an area packed with summer visitors – as the Lake District so often is – dinner at The Ryebek is something of a tradition. There are reasons for this. Away from the hubbub of Bowness, The Ryebek has a serene outlook, the terrace restaurant looking out over sloping gardens to the lake. It's here that Head Chef Dominic Clarke and his team dish up delicious modern British cuisine that not only tantalises the taste buds, but is also a visual feast, akin to a work of art.

After a day of activity and fresh air, boating on the lake and hiking along the path that winds along the bank from Wray Castle back towards Bowness, my mother and I have worked up an appetite. We've freshened up in our lovely room overlooking the garden and now we are ready to feast. Sitting in the lounge, sipping on glasses of crisp white wine, we are offered canapés, the portions laid out on a dark textured plate that emphasises the delicate shapes. "The choice of plate is very important. I try to get a nice contrast between the plates and the dishes, with ingredients being framed to make them seem vibrant," says Chef Clarke. This is evident with these delightful parcels comprised of cheesy beans on parmesan crackers and chicken liver parfait in an éclair-like shell. The intense flavours whet the palate in preparation for the meal to come.

We are led into the dining room and seated by the window, dusk settling over the garden like a light cloak. The menu makes us salivate as we pore over the delicious-sounding dishes, making difficult decisions. Ultimately, I settle on a tuna starter and Cumbrian lamb rump, while my mother opts for pigeon – her first taste of the bird – and asparagus polonaise. Each of these dishes embodies traditional elements blended with

modern techniques, echoing Clarke's brand of kitchen philosophy. "My philosophy on food is that it should be delivered to the diner in a way that gets the best from the ingredients, whether that be modern techniques or traditional cooking. I tend to get my inspiration from the seasons; as they change so do the dishes." Clarke's staples though – garlic, shallots and vinegar – make frequent appearances. "I couldn't cook without them," the Chef declares.

Within minutes of our order being placed, an amuse bouche arrives. We are somewhat surprised when the waiter announces that the line of white powder by the side of the cauliflower espuma is "Coal powder." I raise my eyebrows at my mother as she returns my quizzical look. "Sorry, what was that?" I ask. "Coal powder," he repeats, running us through the complicated process of how it is made. Then the penny drops. Caul powder. Of course. This dish boils down to the essence of cauliflower. It's an intensely flavoured primer for the meal to come.

Our starters are no less impressive. The delicate strips of pigeon contrast beautifully with the unusual combination of Jerusalem artichoke, mandarin, licorice and granola, while the tuna – a delicate pink in the centre, fading to white and tan at its seared edges – sits on a smear of potato espuma and is accompanied by rocket, green beans, and a slow-cooked hen's yolk that is the consistency of toffee. The unassuming star of this dish is the jelly-like cubes of white balsamic, which lend an unexpected vibrant tang.

"I try to get a good balance to most dishes. sweet, sour, bitter, umami, sharp, textures, raw, cooked," says Clarke. "We take the idea for a dish, develop it and then taste it, tweak it, rework it and see how it ends. It's quite an organic process. I like the lads in the kitchen to get involved so they will feel part of the process and take pride in building the dishes."



Cumbrian lamb



Chocolate and mint



Canapés



Tuna



Ryebek Wild Stone Bass



Panacotta



Asparagus Polonaise



Pigeon

The starters have left us eagerly anticipating our mains. The asparagus polonaise is a burst of colour – the vivacious greens of the asparagus and Romanesco pairing with the sun-yellow hen’s yolk, white cauliflower and the deep-tan truffled pomme dauphine swirls. It’s as pretty as a garden painting, bursting from the black plate. “The presentation of the dish is very important. It’s the first impression the diner will get, so it has to be a good one,” says Clarke.

The lamb is equally as intricate. Slices of tender pink meat sit on a creamy pool of sweet potato, a smattering of lentils trailing across the top. A round of confit croustillant is wrapped in crunchiness and a large king oyster mushroom is angled across the plate, the contents encircled by a drizzle of black rice jus. Not one morsel is out of place, both in terms of position and flavour. Together, the disparate ingredients become one mouthwatering extravagance.

My mother quickly selects panacotta with pistachio ice-cream for dessert, while I debate between banana

and custard – the banana sherbet has me intrigued – and chocolate and mint. I implore the waitress to make the decision for me and chocolate wins the day – as it so often does. It is the right choice. Wedges of aerated chocolate, softer than an Aero but heavier than mousse, surround a scoop of mint ice-cream. A puddle of warm, liquid mousse moistens the base and roasted white chocolate is drizzled in concentric circles, spiralling outwards like the rings of Saturn. It is sweet and decadent, but light enough that I can shrug off the calorific guilt and simply indulge.

We depart the terrace waxing lyrical. Dominic Clarke is certainly making his mark on British cuisine, although that mark is probably an edible smear, with enough flavour and colour to engage all of the senses. ■

For more information, to book a room, or to book for dinner at The Ryebek Country House and Restaurant, see www.ryebeck.com.

Chicken, Pea and Broad Bean.

Ingredients

500g frozen peas
8 chicken wings (3 bone)
200g fresh peas in pods
200g broad beans
25g hazelnuts
Truffle oil
Pea shoots to garnish
Black truffle to garnish

Method

The chicken wings are actually three different cuts connected by cartilage. Carefully separate them from each other by easing the tip of a knife between where the bones connect. We are after the middle cut. Discard the other two. This can also be done by your local butcher.

Place the 8 chicken wings in a pan and cover with pomace oil. Add 1 clove of garlic, 1 shallot halved, a sprig of thyme and a bay leaf. Bring up the heat but do not allow the oil to boil. It should cook on a low heat for approximately 45mins to 1 hour until the wings become tender and there is no blood around the bone.

Drain the chicken from the oil carefully, taking care not to damage the meat. Allow to cool slightly.

Whilst still warm, remove the bones from the wing. This is done by pinching the bone, then rotating the wing, freeing the meat. The bones pop right out. Press the chicken lightly whilst cooling in the fridge between two trays.

To make the pea puree allow the peas to defrost, then place in a blender with a little hot stock (or water), season with a pinch of salt and blend on a high speed for 3 minutes. Pass the mix through a fine sieve and set aside.

Fresh peas and broad beans are fantastic. So much better than frozen. To pod both, just unzip them in much the same way as a banana. To cook the peas simply boil the kettle then pour hot water onto the pea. Leave to stand for 30 seconds. They will still have crunch.

To cook the broad beans boil for 1 minute then chill. Once cool, pod them by squeezing on the shell. This is therapeutic and quite enjoyable.

To assemble, heat a little pea puree and place a spoonful in the bottom of the bowl. Scatter the room temperature peas and broad beans into the puree. Pan-fry the chicken wings until golden, season with Maldon salt, and arrange them on top of the peas. Top the chicken with pea shoots. Try to get some height on to the dish. Sprinkle with crushed hazelnuts and sliced truffle.