

Philippe Boucheron enjoys what has to be the best value fine dining in Britain today

It was some 18 months since I last lunched at La Bécasse. This is the bijou restaurant in Corve Street, Ludlow, close to where Shaun Hill had his world-class Merchant House. I understand that Shaun also recently lunched at La Bécasse and was awe-struck by Will Holland's quite outstanding skill at the stove

This young chef, not yet 30, wears his Michelin star lightly. He takes the best, freshest local produce he can find – and in this part of Shropshire it is some of the best that Britain can provide – and simply allows their natural flavours to shine through. True from time-to-time hints of fusion are apparent, but these are not used as artless artifice, but as counter-point to highlight nature's bounty.

I had a morning meeting in Ludlow and dropped in the off-chance that they could find a table for one. Nico, the genial French maitre'd was quite charming and soon sat me down with a glass of Pommery printemps champagne, but no menu. Will popped out of his busy kitchen to say hallo and suggest that since I was alone he puts together some dishes from the lunch menu for me to try. I placed myself in Nico's hands to choose a small glass of white and red wine to accompany the dishes and waited in eager anticipation. The small plates of sweet peanuts, lightly curried pop-corn and guacamole with finger shaped croutons all hinted at the spirit of invention that makes modern British cooking so attractive when in the hands of a master.

A lightly chilled glass of Max-Roger's deliciously gun-flint smoky and crisply aromatic 2006 Sancerre was poured and along came my first dish – a gazpacho 'La Bécasse style'. A delicate chilled tomato soup with a tomato ice cream, a sweet Thai basil jelly all surmounted by the slimmest slice of tomato crisp you could envisage. The hint of aniseed from the Thai basil seasoned the dish, giving it a sense of excitement that alerted the taste buds to more delights to follow.

The first of these was a jellied pig's head terrine, with crispy squid, sauce gribiche and caper berries. There was no gelatine in this dish made from the head being slowly cooked allowing its own natural juices to form the all-important jelly. An old English dish, brought up to date with skill and a degree of understatement that lies at the very core of Will Holland's cooking.

This was followed by the first of my two main courses, but thankfully in miniature. A pan-fried fillet of sea trout on a bed of perfumed puy lentils prepared with coriander, cloves, cumin, cinnamon and black pepper, with a foamy apple purée and a curried veloute. Here was a dish where in every sense, 'The eyes have it'. The presentation, a hall-mark of all Michelin chefs, was a feast in itself. But as ever the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and this was a triumph of balanced flavours that were enhanced by the wine.

At this stage Nico brought along a bottle of 2007 Château de Raousset, a well-structured soft ruby coloured Fleurie with a pepper and floral nose. It was to accompany a ballotine of char-grilled local free range chicken set on a bed of young leeks with wilted wild garlic and strawberry and tarragon jus. Wonderfully exciting both on the eye and the palate, the sweetness of the jus brought out smoky char-grilled flavours of the chicken legs. Will Holland's skill in combining textures and flavours is only surpassed by his exceptional ability to get his seasoning absolutely on the button.

Most chefs see a pre-dessert as an opportunity of rasping the palate clean with citrus. Not young Mr Holland; he caresses it with rhubarb and custard with the merest hint of ginger, a combination that provides the perfect bridge from savoury to sweet. And what a sweet – a warm lemon crêpe with fresh strawberries, strawberry sorbet, basil and a few spots of black pepper caramel. This was a *coupe de grace* that should have got me shouting its praises from the roof tops, but of course we are all too well mannered to do any such thing.

Nico, in his infinite wisdom suggested something sweet from Spain, a 2007 Ochoa Moscatel whose rich aromas and flavours framed the dessert yet adding its own substance and style.

To me there are three things that make a truly great restaurant – a chef whose cooking is inspirational yet, at the same time comforting, a sommelier into whose hands you can safely leave the choice of wine without fear of having the advantage taken, and finally really good coffee. La Bécasse does all three in spades, and with a three course lunch for £26.00 or two courses for £22, it just has to be the best value fine dining in Britain today.

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