

THE BLACK HORSE BEAMISH

It's 7.30 on a Thursday evening and already there are diners steadily entering The Black Horse Beamish. Dating back to the 1700s, The Black Horse Beamish was one of only ten cottages built on the estate of the infamous Bobby Shafto.

Now lovingly restored by owner Bob Fountain, this stylish gastropub has genuine charm with beamed ceilings, exposed stonework and flagged floors. The bar is well stocked with a choice of European lagers, wines and traditional local ales which we decided to sample while we mulled over the mouthwatering options on the menu. Head chef Tony O'Neill, as is the case with many regional and national chefs, is a real champion of quality local produce but not many other chefs have evidence of it growing in the kitchen garden surrounding their restaurants. It genuinely must be the one of the shortest trips from field to plate of any establishment in the country. We had all but chosen our meals for the evening when we were shown the specials board. Quite honestly I could have chosen any of a dozen dishes but we opted for starters of Game Casolade and a simple Prawn Cocktail to be followed by Mignons of Hadrian Heritage Beef Fillet, Grilled Goats Cheese and Pesto with a Red Wine Jus and a 10oz Fillet of Beef with Portobello Mushrooms, Roasted Vine Tomatoes, Onion Rings and a rich Diane Sauce to be accompanied by a Merlot Gran Hacienda Viña Santa Rita, 2008, Chile, (Rapel Valley).

Once we sat at the table the attentive waiter filled our glasses and moments later the first course arrived. The Casolade was sublime, rich, creamy and layered with discs of crisp puff pastry. It is very easy to overcook game meat and it can become tough but there was not even the slightest hint of toughness and in truth it barely warranted chewing. Prawn cocktail is a real 80s classic and it's great to see it on menus again. This one was great - iceberg lettuce, juicy Norwegian prawns and the sweet tomato and brandy flavoured mayonnaise served in a smooth glass tumbler. I don't know why but it always brings a smile to my face, perhaps because it reminds me of practically every Christmas dinner starter I've had since I was a child! First course cleared, we looked around to see a full restaurant of contented diners of all ages. The Black Horse has a real relaxed family feel to it and a great touch is the open kitchen, at the heart of which stands a huge clay oven and grill so you



can see, hear and smell your food before it reaches the table. There is an outdoor dining area with booths that will be perfect for the family while the adjoining field gives the children somewhere to play not too far away from mum. There are also plans for an outdoor bar and kitchen for hog roasts and the like. I have absolutely no doubt that the mix of great food, drink and stunning views over the Beamish valley will see a throng of alfresco diners heading there for the summer. Having spoken briefly to Tony it's almost infectious hearing him talk with a genuine pride and passion about his plans for the restaurant and it's equally clear that he not only wants to maintain the high standard already set but strive to improve at every opportunity.

The main courses arrived after only a short time and our delight matched that of our first course. We had chosen the Red Row Kitchen Garden Vegetables to accompany the main course, and these included honey glazed parsnip, carrots, braised cabbage and silkily smooth mashed potato. The mignons of fillet melted in the mouth, layered with tangy goat's cheese and topped with the fresh pesto. It's not a dish I have eaten before but I would urge you to try it. The beef had that unmistakable sweet flavour I adore that comes from the caramelisation when prepared expertly. Undoubtedly the combination is rich but the freshness of the pesto cuts through the creaminess of the goat's cheese perfectly. The red wine jus was just there in the background bringing the dish together while not overpowering the taste of the beef. The 10oz fillet was cooked as desired and again was as tender as could be. We were given the most enormous steak knives but they simply weren't necessary as you could have cut the steak with a spoon! The classic Diane sauce (which was not on the menu) came in a small jug on the side, and was thick and absolutely packed with flavour. The dessert menu was tempting with Traditional Sticky Toffee Pudding, Baked Passion Fruit Cream and Black Horse Chocolate Brownies on offer but sadly for us both the previous courses were more than enough.

You can expect to pay between £5 and £7 for a starter at The Black Horse Beamish and £8 to £21 for a main course, which is pretty standard, but the food and service you receive is anything but. It's not often you hear about a good country pub serving quality British 'locally sourced' fare but The Black Horse Beamish has all the ingredients to delight diners for a good many years to come. Thursday night and the place was just about full. That says it all. I can't wait to go back in the lighter nights to come.



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