

Restaurant Review

French dignity and class captured

By Milo Boyd

milo.boyd@newsquest.co.uk

THE prestige that surrounds French cuisine is one drawn upon in 'Down and Out in Paris and London', the first full length work of George Orwell. Although now known for his views on the despotic nature of Communism, the book has Orwell struggling to make ends meet in the French capital, finding work as a plongeur. The sordid state of the leftover strewn, freezing cold kitchen is cast to one side when finally, after months of struggling, the restaurant has its first French national customer. So refined are the tastebuds of our continental cousins, one Parisian eating a meal is enough to ensure the success of a struggling start up.

While The Forbury is a fully established independent now in its fourteenth year, it captures all the class, French dignity and exquisite taste Orwell mulled over as he ruefully peeled his potatoes.

Our evening began with a complimentary appetizer in the form of a tomato, red pepper and parmesan, which my companion and I drank from espresso sized glasses as we polished off the complimentary bread. Tomas, our waiter, took our orders before scraping away bread crumbs from the table cloth.

Bottles of 60-year-old wine lay in a rack to the side of our table, covered in a thick layer of dust and labelled into the hundreds of

pounds. Our starters arrived.

For me, sprigs of rocket and hollandaise sauce sat on top of some of the juiciest, freshest asparagus I have ever tasted. Across from me royal Siberian caviar, half a lobster and red onion formed the heart of a rich, and quick to disappear, dish.

Although allusions to Orwell suitably highlight the aspects of French cooking Britain has long loved, any comparison between The Forbury and the less favourable points of the passage would be unfounded. Not only is the restaurant beautifully and airily decorated, the service was exceptionally obliging. Tomas shimmied around us, choosing moments to quietly substitute in cutlery for the oncoming mains, opting to entertain us with his gentle table manner at others.

He withdrew and the next course arrived.

A haunch of venison herb crushed potatoes, braised red cabbage and port jus for my companion, a medium rare 28 day aged rib eye with skinny fries, green beans, field mushrooms and Bordelais sauce for me. Breaking first from the ranks of contented, food focussed silence, I sung the praises of a piece of Angus beef cooked and slightly seasoned to perfection. My companion muttered his agreements, explaining that the use of mustard and potatoes was "quite exceptional".

As we awaited a selection of mini desserts (that would not only see us on our way



but contain a sweet Yorkshire pudding eerily reminiscent of my mother's bread and butter pudding), head chef Davie Bonte introduced himself.

Having left France for Britain 13 years after giving up on a career in carpentry – a trade that runs back nine generations in his family – Bonte went to cookery school on the advice of his sister.

It is her then who we have to thank for our meal which was, easily, the finest I have tasted in Reading. It is thanks to Davey, however, that I now know frogs legs can be bought from the fish mongers in Smelly Alley, and that our Southern neighbours have eaten their way through the entire edible escargot population of France.

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