

EATING OUT

Tavern at the Mill, Thornton

Sometimes it's the little things that impress about a meal out just as much as the major ones. Pub grub is one of the great improvements of the past couple of decades but how many times have you gone to order your food and completely forgotten what you've chosen a few minutes before?

How many times have you been asked what your table number is – only to be left waving in the vague direction of wherever your bemused dining partner is by now waving cheerily back?

Well, one of the various improvements Manchester-based food and drink operators Joseph Holt have brought to their latest acquisition at Marsh Mill in Thornton is a simple little order sheet. No need to lug a menu over to the counter with you or write everything down on the back of the shopping list you thought you'd thrown away weeks ago. Simply fill in your table number, how many are in your party, what drinks you want, and then list your food into starters, main courses, desserts and extras. It's as easy as that – as long you can remember which table to return to while you wait for the extremely friendly and efficient staff at the born-again hostelry to do all the work.

The new look Tavern At The Mill is one of those rare food-based pubs with a designated dining area, a clearly defined drinking area, a family section and a chill out room too.

We aimed for the dining section, these days without having to worry about ceremonial cigar and pipe smokers spoiling the occasion. All sorts of meal deal combinations of what to pick from where require a university degree in promotional technology to understand. So we ignored the lot and chose a combo appetizer for two to share (£8.45). An adequately chilled bottle of Pinot Grigio Veneto (at the quirky price of £11.06) had already arrived so we were well armed to tackle what looked like a daunting plateful. The combo contains garlic bread, crispy duck rolls, cheesy jalapeno peppers, breaded garlic mushrooms, fish goujons, nachos, spicy garlic wedges and onion rings served with sweet chilli, garlic and salsa dips. Plenty to fight over and swap and plenty hot enough to take time over. The wedges were particularly popular though the duck rolls had veered towards being less than crispy.

Liver is one of those dishes I always have a soft spot for – except when it comes to cooking it myself – so the new addition to the main course selection seemed ideal. The braised Welsh lamb's liver (£7.40) comes cooked in a rich onion gravy and is served on a bed of creamy mashed potato with a decent sized portion of seasonal vegetables. There's plenty of it and the liver had retained plenty of taste on the quality (and quantity) controlled journey Joseph Holt insists is sourced "wherever possible" within a 50 mile radius.

Presumably the carne element of the chilli main dish (£6.95) came from similarly close quarters and certainly got a vote if approval. The tomato, chillies and kidney bean sauce was tasty and plentiful and arrived with pleasantly fluffy rice – though the British "tradition" of adding a salad garnish to as many meals as possible perhaps needs addressing.



FOOD FORMS: Ordering is easy at the Tavern at the Mill

FACTFILE



Address: Tavern At The Mill, Marsh Mill Village, Victoria Road East, Thornton

Telephone: (012253) 862586

Open: Daily – from lunchtime to 9pm for food, later for drinks

Booking: Not necessary

Access: Disabled friendly

Credit cards: All major ones accepted. Running a tab is welcomed.

Vegetarian: Good selection

Parking: Spacious Marsh Mill car park.

Children: Family friendly.

Extras: early diner menu (Mon to Sat 3-6pm) – design your own two course meal from selected items plus a free drink for £10. Meal deal – design your own three course menu from selected items, £12.50

Value for money: 8/10

Life! rating: 8/10

The earlier spicy wedges had proved so popular we opted for a side dish of them to accompany the main meals. The result was one drop-out from carrying on through to desserts. However, the option of a rich chocolate pudding with chocolate sauce and ice cream (£3.60) was too tempting for a certain someone. It's clearly a chocolate-holic's dream come true – dark sponge with lashings of chocolate sauce which certainly looked good, even to this observer, and apparently tasted fine too.

The rest of a mineral water and an American coffee completed that meal, a second pint of Diamond lager finished mine.

The total for two plus a gratuity for a pleasantly and efficiently served meal in comfortable surrounds came to around £50 (but could have been done much cheaper for anyone wanting a speedier or lighter meal out.

Robin Duke

WINECORNER

by Jacqueline Morley



LOOK for the wines of the Languedoc. Indeed it's a shame they don't make more of the region – vine planted since the 6th century thanks to the Greeks, on the labelling – leaving it to our rather iffy French geography to sniff it out.

If you have ever visited – and my brother lives on its doorstep in the Pyrenees Orientales – you'll know it's the complete experience: darn good (and generally reasonably priced) wine, fresh fruit, fish, cheese from the market, fine food (there's even an Academie Universelle du Cassoulet, to promote the local dish) – and all within easy reach of Blackpool's Ryanair Gerona link. For inspiration Google Le Village, a Languedoc themed blog of artists, groups and businesses, or check out the Brit-run (former city slickers Alex Charles and Greg Taylor) www.creme-de-languedoc.com

Don't ask my brother. He drives to the Spanish border to buy plonk in giant flagons in supermarkets there.

Here's a taste of what he's missing, and all great for the festive season: Les Quatre Clochers Chardonnay Reserve Limoux 05, £6.99 Tesco, an oak aged creamy classy citrus white, a heady 13.5 per cent – dried fruits, blossoms, and downright delicious. Limoux Chardonnay '05 (a good harvest), Domaine Begude, £8.99 Waitrose (or shop around online) hails from foothills where monks first planted Chardonnay in the 16th century. Wonder what the fruits of their labours tasted like? This is a honey of a white, great with seafood. Screwcapped for freshness.

Punge into the deep purple of St Chinian Les Roches Noires, Cave de Roquebrun (from the Parc Naturel) £6.99 Tesco. Excellent value for an award winner. The one I'd sneak away for personal consumption? La Jasse Castel, Coteaux du Languedoc '02, Montpeyrroux, £10.50 (www.terroir-languedoc.com – a good site to nose around), garnet gorgeous, dark fruits, choc, liquorice, fulsome fruit yet subtle, very tasty and well crafted.

PRICE PLEASER

Somerfield for another fulsome Frenchie, Lussac St Emilion Claret '05, Christmas cakey stuff, for just £5.99 until December 4, so saving £6! Good offers there on champers right now, too.



TOP TIPPLE



Moving away from the Languedoc to the Cotes d'Or region for Les Climats Bourgogne, Pinot Noir Reserve '04, Louis Jadot (synonymous with quality – and since 1859!) Burgundy, a beautifully balanced wine, great style and complexity, immensely enjoyable, far from heavy but just building on layers of flavour. One to linger over. From £12.99 at Tesco or try www.everywine.co.uk.

Don't forget to send your booze news, clubs, favourite finds, swigs and tips to jacqui.morley@blackpoolgazette.co.uk