

“ UNDISCOVERED CITY CENTRE GEM”

CATHERINE CLEARY –
IRISH TIMES, 16/2/13

A hint that Brooks might have an edge was when recent celebrity guest Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall had a tour of the kitchen and a demo of how to turf-smoke a lamb steak. They gave him a souvenir sod of turf so he could try it at home. Patrick McLarnon has been the chef in Brooks for 15 years. He's a blogger (patcooksirish.blogspot.com), forager and gardener.

The dining room is large, modern and comfortable, with banquette seating and angled mirrors. Our veteran waiter flaps the sharply-ironed linen napkins out with a snap and drops them into our laps after we sit down. "Now this is a hot plate," he warns later as he holds it just out of arm's reach, as if not sure whether I'm to be trusted.

There are four lovely things on this piping hot plate: a disk of feather soft Fivemiletown goat's cheese, pureed sweet potato, a small tangle of dressed leaves and some toasted pumpkin seeds. I'd like a little something else crunchy to put all these lusciously soft things on, so I eye Paul's curly melba toasts. He's having the duck liver pate. I'll hazard a guess it's onions and livers fried on a pan, drizzled with brandy and cream, blended to a moussy smoothness and topped with clarified butter.

It tastes quietly brilliant and the second best thing is its arrival at room temperature, not fridge-chilly. Two generous glasses (€7.95) of the La Vendimia Rioja-Tempranillo-Grenache blend go down nicely.

Main courses are just as sure-footed, guinea fowl stuffed with brandy-sozzled prunes and a celeriac puree is judged "just right". My two rectangles of crisply finished pork belly sit on top of kale and bacon strips stirred into buttery mashed potato. The pork is a layer cake of crisp crackling, fat, white pale meat darkening to a deep brown. Every morsel is memorably good.

This is the food of a chef who cares. The keg yard has a small vegetable patch and McLarnon has a plan to grow garlic in wine crates. In elderflower season he'll be heading to the yard of Kilmainham garda station to forage, and someone has just shared a secret Dublin samphire spot with him.

THE VERDICT:

McLarnon is quietly making lovely Irish dinners with great ingredients.

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FRANCESCA'S - A FLAIR FOR FOOD”

ROSS GOLDEN-BANNON –
THE SUNDAY BUSINESS POST 24/2/13

The quiet little restaurant in Brooks Hotel seems an unlikely place for a feed of good nosh. Yet, several people have mentioned it to me and a closer inspection of a menu proudly boasting Irish artisan suppliers suggested I had been prejudiced in my judgement.

The menu reads bistro-style, and manages to balance golden-oldies with hotel staples and a few interesting twists. Being a Dublin restaurant, I felt its seafood chowder (€6.50) should be worth a try. Recently the long food trail connected to processed burgers came as a surprise to many, but just as many would be surprised at how much frozen fish our coastal capital serves - and how far that frozen fish has travelled.

This version was served in a small bowl; a good choice as chowder is a rich dish. Although it was super-hot, and high temperatures can often kill delicate flavours, there were plenty of fishy notes to be found. Less chunky than I'd expected and with a restrained use of cream, it looked like we might be off to a good start.



We'd ordered a bottle of Villa Huesgen Riesling from Mosel (€39.50), which had just the right balance of fruit, youthful spritz and dryness for nearly all our food.

A further starter was the St Tola goat's cheese, which was served warm and came with a slick of muted, flavoured sauce. A third element of crunchy nuts all made for a happy frame for a quality Irish cheese. I also liked what they did to this dish when the bill came: it was automatically included in the three-course table d'hôte menu for €29. Nice touch.

For the main course I had the pan-fried Dublin Bay prawns (€26) with colcannon and an Irish whiskey cream sauce. The colcannon was packed with fine greens - though the mashed potatoes had dried out a little. The sauce made for a velvety and necessary accompaniment. Slivers of crispy bacon added a salty underpinning yet were elegantly placed so the 'bacon and cabbage' antecedent stepped out in style. My companion had the pork belly which was a magic dish of contrasting crispiness, sweet fat and rich flesh. Superb.