

FOOD & DRINK

A tepid taste of the past in Bath

Joseph Connolly finds only muted pleasures at the Georgian Dower House

It's Bath time, kids! A compulsion which quite often comes upon me, because Bath is a city that I deeply adore. I hadn't been here for a while, so was mooning about reasonably gormlessly, feasting upon the architecture, though wondering too about feasting on food – because there isn't much around, rather surprisingly. Loads of places to gorge on Jane Austen cream teas, Lord save us – and there appears to be a serious fixation upon Cornish pasties, which is just a little weird in Somerset, but let it lie.

I sloped into the Pump Room to take the waters, which I remembered as being perfectly foul – ah, but I was young and untried in those days, with a sadly unsophisticated palate. So, let's see, I thought: I'm getting warmth (Bath water?) with an overtone of Vichy and an undertow of neglected guttering ... still perfectly foul, then.

Dinner time brought me to The Dower House, in Bath's swishest hotel, the Royal Crescent. Situated bang at the centre of this magnificent sweep, the interior is pretty stylish too, in an understated and pleasingly English sort of a way. The Dower House itself is a beautiful pedimented Georgian building at the back of an enchanting garden.

I do not have a beautiful pedimented Georgian building at the back of my garden – nor, alas, at the front. So: an aperitif on the lawn, by a twisting lavender path. House champagne (£12.50) is Taittinger, and also teensy-weensy: the last time I saw a glass as small as this it came free with a bottle of Optrex. Buckshee canapés – mainly crunchy chicken truffle balls, but heavy on the garlic: not great in a canapé.

But now begins the charade: a straight-faced parody of how the restaurant trade collectively decided fine dining ought to be in about 1995. The head waiter intuitively divined that I had never before actually seen a menu, and therefore put his back into explaining it to me: here is the tasting menu ... yes? Here are the starters ... and here are the mains ... yes? Well okay ... I'll see how I get on, then – but don't stray too far away, or I might just go all to pieces. It was exactly the same when the sommelier solemnly presented an unremarkable fleurie (at a rather remarkable £39). I was told that I had ordered a wine from Beaujolais, which is made from the Gamay grape – rather as if I had donned a blindfold, jabbed a pin at random into the wine list, and now was being informed to just what degree Lady Luck had chosen to smile upon me.

The menu was



'Is everything all right?': The service at The Dower House was suffocating

augury of coronaries to come and the peas were peas. Before this was an amuse bouche of apple jelly, loads more bits and bobs – but all I got out of it was pepper, so my bouche stayed resolutely po-faced.

Then came roast John Dory, basil couscous, pink grapefruit, crayfish and Szechuan pepper. A nice piece of fish, but overwhelmed by the sheer acidity of grapefruit.

Pork – loin, glazed belly, beignet (a sort of frittery thing) and crispy skin with sage and apple quinoa, alliums, thyme jus ... in other words, three sorts of pork, each rather dry; nothing so vulgar as recognisable vegetables; the "crispy skin" (not crackling, but rather akin to slightly soggy Quavers); the whole ensemble, although quite preposterously arranged exactly as decreed on MasterChef, still not remotely constituting dinner. As for quinoa: as well we know, it is no more than the devil's gravel.

The room was muted, and so were the diners – who on earth's idea would this be of a good night out? The "service" could suffocate you, all done by numbers: at every table, each gesture and phrase never varies. You are ceaselessly instructed to "enjoy" and asked, "Is everything all right?" until you feel quite thoroughly pummelled, and at bay – though still the waitress is talking right through you to robotically utter these things, while blithely stretching across your face to pour the wine.

Puddings – such as a pointlessly deconstructed peach melba – are £12.50; somebody is having a good old giggle at that. Still though, everyone around me simply couldn't suppress their effusive thanks. Such diners as these might all soon succumb to death by servile and unwarranted gratitude.

16 Royal Crescent, Bath, Somerset BA1 2LS (01225 823333; royalcrescent.co.uk)

THREE OF A KIND GEORGIAN

The George
Seafood cooked on a charcoal grill. Read Joseph Connolly's review at telegraph.co.uk/food 98 High St, Rye, East Sussex; 01797 222114; thegeorgeinrye.com

Tamada
Food from Georgia, marrying European and Middle Eastern culinary traditions 122 Boundary Rd, London; 020 7372 2882; tamada.co.uk

The Georgian House
Posh pub grub in the Channel Islands Victoria St, Alderney; 01481 82 2471; georgianalderney.com

threatening "classic cuisine with a contemporary edge" – and the only thing on a menu more lowering than a twist is an edge. So for my comrade: duck liver torchon, parfait, celeriac, crispy chicken skin, green salad and, um, camomile tea. And for me: slow cooked free range duck egg, peas, spring onion and girolle broth, pork skin crumb, duck fat soldiers and Australian truffle.

I remain profoundly suspicious of any dish that takes longer to write down than it does to eat. The foie gras torchon (cylinder) was very cold and not at all luscious like the dabs of parfait – with no toast upon which to shovel it all. As to the camomile tea, the taste was redolent of the Floris hand wash to be found in the laboratories. The egg, basically, was boiled egg, sharpened up with that damnable contemporary edge: the yolk was rich and good, the bread fried in duck fat was a nicely plated

OUR RATING 4/10

'A straight-faced parody of fine dining in 1995'



Our guide to Britain's best pubs. This week: Prince of Wales, Birmingham

Keith Marsden, British Institute of Innkeepers Licensee of the Year, is sporting a natty straw hat and a colourful short-sleeved shirt. He looks like a man dressed for the beach rather than a pub garden in Birmingham. He also looks like someone who should have a cigar clamped in his chops. "Funny you should mention that," he says and leads the way to the Cigar Bar, one of several huts hereabouts. It's Thursday evening and the Prince of Wales' resident Ukulele Club is warming up for its rehearsal night in a neighbouring hut. Members sometimes serenade the sizeable crowd gathered under a vast canopy. "In winter we have a huge log-burner called Bruno out here," says Keith, who used to be in brand marketing for Coca-Cola.

The brand of cigar that he's holding up reverentially, as though it recently rolled off a virgin's thigh, is a Cohiba. "That would set you back around 50 quid," he confides.

Lesser brands start at around a tenner. Aficionados can relax on comfortable settees and gaze through the haze while also enjoying a pint. "Or a brandy?"

"Rum's better with cigars," Keith assures me. Funny he should mention that. Another hut offers rum-based cocktails. There's also a well-stocked wine hut. You can tell we're in "Moseley village", as the residents call this, the Islington of Brum. The only food you can get at the pub, mind you, is from another hut dealing

mainly in burgers and hot dogs – and that's just from Thursdays to Sundays.

"There are plenty of restaurants round here," Keith shrugs. "This is essentially a boozier."

Funny he should mention that. Since heading along a tiled passageway to the garden, I'd almost forgotten that there's a pub back there. Not just any old pub either. The Prince has been a Moseley institution since the 1860s.

Either side of the passageway are two handsome snugs, one with studded leather seats and oak-panelled walls. And at the front is a proper public bar with scuffed lino and a lengthy line of hand pumps.

Purity's Mad Goose, a zesty medium-strength pale ale from rural



Warwickshire, seems to be the most popular beer this evening. There are also welcome visitors from further afield, such as Timothy Taylor's Landlord and the aromatic Bishop's Farewell from Oakham Ales.

A huge stag's head of the sort that used to appear on the Morecambe and Wise Show is gazing impassively from the doorway as I make my own farewell. "What do you think of it so far?"

"Could be worse," its expression seems to say. "I could be in the Cigar Bar."

Chris Arnot

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