

FOOD & DRINK

The moor the merrier

This season, grouse has been hard to come by – but *Joseph Connolly* tracked a brace down to Dean Street Townhouse, London W1

I am a townie; and every single one of us is, frankly, quite pathetic. We don't understand the country: to us, the country is another country. On our occasional excursions there, we squeal if our new Hunter wellies (in quite the wrong colour) are inadvertently splattered, or our stiff and box-fresh Barbour's encounter anything approaching weather.

We don't even comprehend how to conduct ourselves when invited on a country weekend. We will roll up late, with flowers (flowers!) when what is required is a case of claret. We will hog all the hot water and meekly protest that our room is a little chilly, but demur when our host simply hurls another lurcher on to the quilt. We just don't see that it's all about pulling your weight with chores to the extent that you end up doing far more work than you would in a month in London – nor do we get that we are expected to rise at dawn and walk for bleeding miles, never once shrieking out loud at the sight of vermin in the hedgerows.

And how should we know that chucking-out time is after Sunday tea, whereupon you must leave a whole pile of cash on the chest of drawers for the benefit of the (unseen, and

possibly non-existent) staff?

What we do understand about country people, however, is that they are really so *marvellously* adept at killing things. Leisure pursuits? Go for it, lads: stalk that deer, shoot those birds, chase that fox and hook that fish.

In my view, the most thoroughly worthwhile slaughter in the calendar began a fortnight or so ago, on the 12th of this month. Oh, God, yes – the grouse, here is the king of game, worth any effort or expense to secure. Every August, I simply lust for it – though this year (due to circumstances quite beyond a townie's capacity to fathom) the haul has been meagre.

Great news for restaurants, of course, because now they can bang up even further the customarily blinding price that punters seem eager to pay: down south, if you find a grouse with all the trimmings for under £30, you're doing rather well. Many of these will be devoured in gentlemen's clubs: I have, in my time, enjoyed excellent grouse in the Garrick, White's and the Athenaeum. But there's not much point reviewing them.

As to restaurants, Rules and Wiltons are renowned for it, but what of places less famous? Many are reluctant to list it because supplies are uncertain – but the Dean Street Townhouse is one



THREE OF A KIND GAMEY

Rules, London
Ultra-traditional (and a tad formal for some), but excellent. 34-35 Maiden Lane, London WC2E 7LB; 020 7836 5314, rules.co.uk

St John, London
Fergus Henderson currently has grouse on the menu – it just says "grouse" – at his Smithfield mothership. 26 St John Street, London EC1M 4AY; 020 7251 0848, stjohngroup.uk.com

Castle Terrace Restaurant, Edinburgh
It's a bit "nouvelle cuisine", but the venison here is superb. 33/35 Castle Terrace, Edinburgh EH1 2EL; 0131 229 1222, castleterracerestaurant.com

that is unafraid to put it on the menu, so I went there. Well, of course I did.

Here is yet one more outpost of Nick Jones's Soho House empire, just around the corner from the original club. A stylish place, indeed, with extremely polite and eager service, within what is one of the West End's most elegant small hotels.

It is a restaurant of two parts: the main space is Georgian cornices and panelling, made fab by red leather upholstery and white linen cloths and napkins. Then there is an extraordinarily cosy section that is all Turkish rugs, velvet chairs, cushions and pornographic wallpaper. (It's true: a while ago – name drop alert – I lunched here with Lady Antonia Fraser, who remarked that the autumnal shade and pattern of the walls exactly matched her dress. Well... not exactly: if you peer closely at the wallpaper, designed by acclaimed portraitist Jonathan Yeo, it is a sea

OUR RATING
8/10

Country people are *marvellously* adept at killing things



69 – 71 Dean St, London W1D 3SE; 020 7434 1775; deanstreettownhouse.com
Three courses (inc grouse) with wine: about £75 per head

of rudeness. Lordy.)

Anyhoo, my guest was kicking off with prawn and crab salad – extremely generous on both – and I went for Morecambe Bay potted shrimps. These were a buttery pleasure – room temperature with a touch of paprika, the texture very creamy and moreish. But I was gaggingly eager for the main event: a bloke in Soho, keenly awaiting a bird.

The first sight of the gorgeous little thing, plump and roasted to a raw umber colour, is always worthy of a gasp – and our brace looked magnificent. As did the orgy of traditional accompaniment: bread sauce (essential), game chips (crisps that look like little waffles), the liver made into a paté, and of course the gravy.

Which... was the only thing that let us down. It actually interfered with the superb sweetish and deep lusciousness of the just-pink grouse – high on protein, low in fat and huge on flavour; hung for a week before serving (about the golden mean if you ask me). The gravy looked the part – dark and glossy – but it was so very intense: too concentrated a reduction of stock and wine: actually (whisper this) rather beefy.

The paté was a fine parfait: glossy, sleek and smooth, and not aggressively liverish; the bread sauce spot on; the game chips (and some runner beans) good too.

With a decent Languedoc, oh, what practically perfect joy. This season, my grouse quotient is still in single figures, though they'll be on the menu for a few weeks yet – and I already anticipate with vile and greedy delight the next glorious 12th.

Joseph Connolly's *A-Z of Eating Out* (Thames & Hudson) is available from Telegraph Books



Pint to pint

Our guide to the best British pubs. This week: *The Crown Inn, Hastings*

Sunshine is dancing through the windows, bringing a lovely glow into what is really quite a dark room – all black and navy paint, beamed ceilings and old wood. But the Crown is not the least bit broody or sullen. Not with red vaudeville-style lights running behind the bar and paintings on the walls.

This is a traditional old boozier given a big lick of paint and a lot of love, and since it opened a year ago it has stolen the hearts not just of the hip, arty FILTH "Failed In London Try Hastings" crowd, but also the old-school stalwarts: the hippies, the fishermen and a host of other characters who call this seaside town home.

Just below the East Hill country park and a pebble's throw from the stony beach, the Crown sits on All Saints Street; its pavement tables and chairs overlook a terraced row of higgledy-piggledy houses. (Some of the oldest surviving buildings in Hastings – dating from 1450 – are in this street.) There are dogs inside and out, people playing board games or snoozing in the corner. It is high summer when we visit, and there are wild flowers on the tables. In less clement weather there are log fires and it wouldn't surprise me if the bar staff brought out knee blankets.

The Crown lay empty for a few years until it was spotted by Tess Eaton and Andrew Swan, a young couple who had moved down from Leeds with a plan to change the ambience of the place, with a little help from the area's rich seam of craftsmen and producers – the vast crown sculpture above

the door, the furniture, the art, the illustrations are all by locals.

The theme continues on the pumps, where the rotating selection will always include ales and beer from Sussex. There's straw-coloured, earthy but citrusy Hastings Beer's Saison Simple (4% abv) from nearby St Leonard's as well as their 3Cs American Pale Ale. English Garden Ale (3.8%), is from Franklins Brewery in Bexhill.

There's a whole host of stuff from outside Sussex, including St Michael's Bitter (4%), from the Cornish Crown Brewery and Black IPA (5.9%) from TickyBrew in Stalybridge. There are 19 ciders available, mostly by the bottle, and an amazing selection of gins (12 of them) and whiskeys (16).

With fishing boats landing their catch directly on Hastings beach, and smokeries abounding, the Crown's menu really makes the best of the local larder – skate wing, mussels, peas, peashoots, leeks and seafood cream followed by strawberries, shortbread, vanilla cream and lemon meringue ice cream from nearby Bodiam.

And in its bid to truly embrace localism, the Crown hosts regular events including a crafting bee – think macramé potholder weaving and leather coin-purse making – and "Sunday stories in the snug"; there's a pub quiz, occasional music and odd sessions such as wild foraging followed by cocktail making and brewery tap takeovers. I wish it was my local.

Audrey Gillan

64-66 All Saints St, Hastings, TN34 3BN (01424 465100; thecrownhastings.co.uk)



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