



The Red Cat by Paul Ogden



THE saying that cats have nine lives is obviously due to their ability to escape unscathed from perilous situations. That is no more true than at The Red Cat, a restaurant of mixed history but with a reputation for good food that always preceded it. I first ate there more than 30 years ago on my 10th birthday in a time when children were rarely taken anywhere remotely posh. I can't remember what I had but I'm sure it was excellent, maybe presented in a basket, but good all the same.

Authentic trattoria

At that time, The Red Cat was thought of as a destination restaurant, pulling in diners from a wide area. In the Eighties, it went Italian – in a good way – an authentic trattoria run by a man from the old country who brought a chink of continental sunshine to Thatcher's grim Lancashire. Then came the dark ages. Maybe due to complacency, maybe due to new owners but The Red Cat curled up and went to sleep, with declining food standards, poor décor and just the charming stone building giving the only reason to stop off there. But a couple of years ago brothers Mike and Chris Rawlinson bought it, gave it a modest makeover, sourced some quality ingredients and are now serving up good value, inventive British food with strong flavours and a touch of wit. Another life for the Red Cat.

Palate cleanser

The restaurant lies on a fast road near Chorley and since its recent revamp has frosted glass partitions which section off the dining area into manageable and discreet spaces while still allowing the low ceilings to amplify the atmosphere. Our night began with an amuse bouche of cream cheese wrapped in smoked salmon and topped with a pinch of caviar – hardly revolutionary but a nice palate cleanser with good quality ingredients. It led smartly on to my starter of crayfish cocktail (£7.50), a dish that gave nod to that Red Cat of 30-odd years ago, especially with its parmesan cheese straws. Small snippets of shellfish (their taste a little anonymous) within shredded greens in a wide glass.

Refreshing lightness

Below was a tomato and tabasco jelly, set at just the right viscosity and containing a great marriage of subtle heat and refreshing lightness. Over the table were four firm slices of monkfish cheeks (£7.50) on a moist bed of crabmeat, with just a drizzle of lemon oil to lift it all. Wonderful. Chef Chris must favour fish, it comprises four mains from a roster of 10. That shows a maturity which belies his mere 23 years, but his short career has packed a lot in. He worked under David Aspin at Simply Heathcotes, in Manchester, in 2002, and later followed his mentor into the kitchen at long-gone Establishment.

Bound for France

Aspin, incidentally, is currently head chef at Rocpool Reserve Hotel, in Inverness, where he has been taken under the wing of Albert Roux, as his Chez Roux is set to open there next month. After leaving Manchester, Chris worked in Australia and was bound for France when the chance to own The Red Cat with his brother came along. They re-opened it in December, 2006, with Mike leading the relaxed, efficient front-of-house, which is now made up of a mixture of polite, but nervous sixth formers and older more experienced hands. A couple of weeks ago, Chris won the Cheshire heat of the North West Young Chef of the Year, at South Trafford College, in Altrincham, where he trained.

Small oblong

One of the judges was Aiden Byrne, the youngest English chef to gain a Michelin star (when he was 22) and doing great things, apparently, with his Church Green restaurant, in Lymm. He can obviously spot a young chef's potential and that was evident in our mains. My small oblong of Lancashire belly pork (£17.50) was a perfect example of a dish that is averagely turned out in many a gastropub nowadays. But this was how it should be done. Melting meat and a caramelly crisp skin that came with a roundel of pud-black, deep-tasting pig's cheek ballantine.

Retro onion ring

There was also an inventive cone of pork and apple pudding. The suet could have done been a tad more moist but the apple came through beautifully. There was also a cheeky shallot tatin, disguised as a retro onion ring. The braised beef opposite, sourced from H Greaves and son, of Skelmersdale (they would say Upholland), which came with a sublime truffle mash, baby leeks and broad beans (£16.50). The wine list is not extortionate and we plumped for a £16.95 bottle of simple and young Alto Pampas Del Sur Pinot Noir. Desserts also reached the previous high bar. My presentation of lemon tart (£6.50) looked like an explosion in a clown's wardrobe.

Velvet lemon posset

The zingy tart came with a velvet lemon posset in a glass topped with an intense blueberry foam and red and yellow blobs of sweetness scattered like dropped juggling balls across the plate. My partner's dish of rhubarb (£6.50) was just as much fun. Intense rhubarb crème brûlée came with delicate slivers of "tusky" carpaccio – rhubarb so soft you swore it was not raw – on which was scattered a memory timebomb of sugar crackle. When I was 10 it was called Space Dust and I thought it was mined by angels. It is nice to see the after the chequered intervening years this restaurant is better than it has ever been. That old moggy is certainly the cat's whiskers now.

The Red Cat, Blackburn Road, Whittle-le-Woods, Chorley, PR6 8LL (01257 263966, theredcat.co.uk).

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