

## RESTAURANT

# Joanna Blythman

Another example of accomplished cooking confirms Perth as the gastronomic heart of Scotland

**PERTH is the gastronomic heart** of Scotland, punching way beyond its weight and size in the good-food stakes. There really is no other place in Scotland where it is easier to eat well. The city itself hosts several fine restaurants which – unlike the flashy, here today, gone tomorrow establishments that come and go in bigger cities – simply keep serving excellent food, year after year. There is the elegant but unpretentious Sixty Three Tay Street, run by Jeremy and Shona Wares, where you will never eat a bad, let alone indifferent meal.

There was Let's Eat, another chef-proprietor outfit run by Tony Heath and Shona Drysdale. They have recently decided to move on after 10 much-lauded years – disaster! – but Willie Deans, the top-notch chef who put the Buttery in Glasgow back on the map, has ridden to the rescue. On his track record, Let's Eat must surely have another wonderful decade ahead of it.

Out of town, there's the impeccable Andrew Fairlie at Gleneagles, the standard bearer for Scotland's gastronomy on a world stage. Bill McGuigan continues to delight everyone in the environs of Crieff with his reliable, good value Bank restaurant. Hamish's in Methven is another sound address in similar vein. If you're after a country-house treat, there's still Ballathie House near Stanley, or Kinloch House Hotel outside Blairgowrie.

This is more than a foodie cluster. It looks like a proper food culture, one that feeds off an abundance of first-rate local produce and an appreciative audience of diners savvy enough to recognise good food when they see it. Now, to add to the *melée*, Graeme Pallister, last spotted sharing the stove with Bill McNicol at Kinloch House, has turned up at the Parklands Hotel in the 'Fair City'. This is an attractive small hotel that has been extended in a haphazard way, producing rooms with rather odd shapes, but it is warm, welcoming, and agreeably non-corporate in feel.

Running my eye down the menu in the Acanthus Restaurant, (the hotel also has a bar eaterie called Number 1 The Bank), I knew that I was going to like it, and not just because the bite-sized nibbles of crispy fish cakes and truffled mushroom roulade were rather good. It offers four options at each



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course, and they made perfect sense to me, the two most obvious organising principles being classic flattering combinations of ingredients and a commitment to seasonality. It is great to see someone make good use of rabbit. Here, it turned up with crumbly black pudding in a warm, slightly sweet steamed ballotine, atop a delightfully savoury roasted garlic and parsley risotto, lightly embellished by a sort of beetroot and carrot vermicelli, flavoured with just a hint of caraway seed. This might sound over elaborate, but it wasn't. The other starter was just a very superior, slightly foamy celeriac soup, wherein floated crunchy hazelnut 'dumplings' (more like small balls of pizza dough).

Main courses which have many elements often trip themselves up with complication, a criticism that might be levelled at the main course fillet of roe deer. This consisted of three generous slices of unbelievably well-flavoured, pink, succulent meat, served with a horseradish mash fiery enough to clear the nasal passages, nicely fondant Belgian chicory

caramelised with fig vinegar and a Yorkshire pudding filled with a generous helping of braised oxtail. For me, the Yorkie and oxtail was an element too far, blurring the roast/stew distinction, but my dining companion liked the dish all the more for that.

There was total unanimity, however, about the roast rack of pork. This was a really classy bit of pig, not over-lean, with wonderful crackling. It sat on a bed of floury, creamy, deliciously seasoned haricot beans and was flanked by ultra-crisp belly pork, stir-fried parsnip and carrot, a glorious potato croquette scented with tarragon, and a fresh pasta ravioli, filled with pumpkin. Lots of voices here but all singing from the same songsheet.

Of the desserts, a gorgeously fresh gingerbread-flavoured *crème brûlée* with fresh ginger biscuits outshone a likeable, but rather too solid, hot chocolate fondant. The people who serve are relaxed and amiable. The wine list focuses on less ubiquitous growers and mark-ups are lower than most establishments of this quality. Another jewel in the Perthshire crown.

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**Acanthus**  
Parklands Hotel, 2 St Leonard's Bank, Perth, 01738 622451  
**Dinner: £27.50**  
**Food rating: 9/10**