

Reviewed by Tracey MacLeod

Saturday, 29 January 2011

Fine food without the fuss

...Tom sent me a friendly e-mail out of the blue, inviting me to be the first national restaurant critic to review Van Zeller. It sounded great; relaxed fine dining, innovative, seasonally-inspired food, and – the clincher – backing from David Moore, co-owner of the two-Michelin-starred Pied à Terre and one of Raymond Blanc's inspectors on The Restaurant. Tick, tick, tickety-tick, as M Blanc probably never said.

He's a big figure on the Yorkshire dining scene – a local lad who started his career at the famous Betty's Tea Rooms and worked with Raymond Blanc and Tom Aikens, among others, before returning to Yorkshire and, in 2009, opening his own restaurant.

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Very appealing it is, too; tucked away down a quaint shopping street in Montpellier, the most affluent part of affluent Harrogate, just down the hill from Betty's. The smart but not overly formal dining room reflects Van Zeller's “fine food without the fuss” philosophy, the standard-issue black leather chairs, cream walls, white tablecloths and hotel artwork offset by a pleasingly scruffy black wooden floor.

The surprises are saved for the menu, or rather menus; as well as the à la carte, there's a good-value set menu and a six-course tasting menu. All of them are more than usually interesting; Van Zeller's style is innovative without being radical or gimmicky, built around superb, often local, ingredients. It's not often you see Yorkshire cobble on the same menu as lapsang souchong espuma.

A starter of roast mallard breast, from the nearby Ripley Castle estate, impressed not just for the big, deep flavour of the ruby-red meat, but for the range of flavours that surrounded it; a dusting of powdered cep underpinning the dish with a subtle note of umami, while



Venison Loin (Roe) from the Scottish Highlands, Beetroot Purée, Braised Bok Choy, Choucroute, Morteau Sausage with a Walnut infused sauce.

celeriac remoulade and quince jelly did interesting things in the foreground. From the set menu, ham hock terrine, pressed into two generous bricks, was more labour-intensive than you'd expect at this price point, with its Morse code dots of beetroot purée, spiced fruit chutney and twist of potato galette.

That beetroot purée reappeared alongside loin of Scottish venison, rested, like the duck, to the point of tenderness, along with a fabulous choucroute spiked with smoked sausage. Golden, thumbnail-sized queen scallops, pan-fried and generous in number for a set-meal dish, came with a herby risotto dotted with glossy squid-ink purée, slightly

over-reliant on truffle-oil for its impact, but otherwise excellent.

Puddings confirmed Van Zeller's sure touch; a warm slice of hazelnut cake with treacle foam – the first foam of the lunch – and a complicated chocolate arrangement which combined a dark and slippery tart and a brownie depth-charged with something popcornish.

Van Zeller is certainly working hard to pull in punters of every pay-grade, notably by offering a steal of a January sale menu at £12.50 for three courses. With cooking of this quality, this cracking little restaurant deserves to be packed with customers.