

Thursday 13th November 2008

Food and drink: 10 / 10 Service: 10 / 10 Atmosphere: 10 / 10 Value for money: 9 / 10

The irresistible smell of hot, mulled cider and a crackling log fire stopped me in my tracks as I opened the door of The Albion. And then there were the mouthwatering aromas emanating from the open kitchen next to the bar - the smell of fish stew and devilled kidneys with mash.

After eating my way around Cabot Circus for the past month, returning to The Albion in Clifton Village was like coming home and being wrapped in the culinary equivalent of cotton wool.

In her new book *The Gastropub Cookbook*, food writer Diana Henry singles out The Albion as one of the finest examples of the genre - and it really does tick all the gastropub boxes. There's the open kitchen, the farmhouse table groaning under the weight of freshly baked bread, leather sofas in front of the real fire and huge sprays of flowers.

But then there are also the pubbier elements - the bar snacks, the boxes of board games and the three real ales on offer alongside the well-chosen wine list.

I've been a fan of The Albion since day one and have eaten there regularly, but in the past year it seems to have just got better and better.

Owner Owain George has left head chef Jake Platt to his own devices and this trust has paid off, for The Albion is currently serving some of the best food in Bristol without a shadow of a doubt.

Platt is one of those ballsy, stubborn chefs who only cooks seasonal British food and only uses local suppliers. He follows the Fergus Henderson and Mark Hix school of cooking and there are no better mentors when it comes to honest, unpretentious food.

I dined at The Albion twice last week and not only were the menus very different, but they didn't contain a single dish I wouldn't happily eat all day.

On the first visit, I started with an excellent jellied ham (£6), which arrived as a thick crazy paving mosaic of ham hock cemented together with its own jelly. It was served with some garlic-rubbed toast and a neat little mound of piquant piccalilli. Brilliant.

This was followed by a knockout steak, stout and kidney pie (£11.50) served in an old-fashioned china pie dish. As I cut into the golden pastry lid, plumes of steam billowed out of the dark, sumptuous mix

which comprised a generous amount of ridiculously tender beef, kidney, bacon lardons and a rich, dark sauce which had a pleasingly bitter edge due to the stout. Next to the pie were two dinky little black Le Creuset dishes, one with sweet braised red cabbage and one with the silkiest, most buttery mash. A more perfect autumn pub dish would be difficult to imagine.

Unusually for a gastropub, desserts are a strength at The Albion, rather than an afterthought. The hazelnut pannacotta (£5) was quite special - a perfectly wobbly, nutty, milky dome served with an intriguing and impressive butternut squash ice cream that was neither too sweet or too vegetal.

It was such a perfect meal that I went back a few days later just to see if I had simply caught them on a good day. Surely no gastropub can be so consistently good? And, do you know what, it was almost better the second time.

A blindingly good starter of duck hearts (six of the blighters) on bone marrow toast (£6) with a heavily reduced sauce flecked with shredded pig's trotter must rank as one of the best dishes I've eaten anywhere all year. Utterly, jaw-on-the-table delicious.

It was followed by a perfectly cooked Devon skate (£12.50) which came with a warm, melting pile of potted brown shrimps, and finished with a delicious frozen blackcurrant mousse (£5) with candied fennel and finely sliced discs of liquorice that actually looked like shaved truffles.

How life-affirming to see a Bristol eatery actually getting better and better, rather than sliding downhill like so many others.

Based on these two faultless displays of confident, passionate cooking, The Albion is arguably the best place to eat in the city right now. I suggest you seize the moment.

Mark Taylor