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The Double Red Duke, Oxfordshire: 'It's a class act' - restaurant review

Jay Rayner on
 restaurants
 Food



Jay Rayner



The simple menu at this Oxfordshire pub barely hints at the glories of the food on your plate

The Double Red Duke, Bourton Road, Clanfield, Bampton, Oxfordshire OX18 2RB (01367 810222). Snacks and small plates £7.50-£16, large dishes £12-£35, desserts £9, wines from £27

Later, I would think of it as the redemptive scallop; as the bivalve that made amends for the tragically broken promise of the one that had gone before. Then I would hate myself for allowing the ludicrous phrase “redemptive scallop” into my head. At the time, though, all I thought was: “Damn, there are three of them. That means I have to share the other one. Why, God, why?” It came on the shell, under a thick drift of crisp, golden breadcrumbs which in turn had been drenched gleefully in wild garlic-flecked butter. The scallop had been cooked to a glossy mother of pearl within, and there, like a showily tinted comma from an illuminated manuscript, was the brilliant orange of the coral. Eventually, I took to scraping at the ridges of the shell for the crusty bits. There were many crusty bits.

The one that had gone before was served to me at [Gridiron](#), at London's sleek Metropolitan Hotel. On the menu it read impressively: "Wood-roast scallop with smoked roe and paprika butter." What arrived was limp, underpowered and apologetic. The link between these two starkly different scallops is the same consultant chef, Richard Turner, also executive chef of the Hawksmoor Group. At the time I concluded Turner's gutsy shtick simply didn't work amid the sleek white lines of the Metropolitan; that the environment demanded a certain ungainly Gucci-ed poise that didn't fit his full-fat approach. (Gridiron has remained closed since the start of the first lockdown.)



But I am nothing if not an optimist. One of the new ventures to emerge out of the most recent lockdown was the relaunch of the Double Red Duke, a handsome honey-stoned pub in that part of Oxfordshire where nothing bad has ever happened and nobody has ever farted, or even thought of doing so. It has been added to a small but growing portfolio of country pubs run by Sam and Georgie Pearman, who made their name overseeing Cheltenham's always reliable Lucky Onion group. Early on, Turner was announced as consultant chef with one of his Hawksmoor head chefs, Richard Sandiford, installed in the kitchen. When I visited they told me Turner was no longer involved, though the menu is the same as the one they touted when he was attached. It is smeared with his animal-fat finger prints. Surely it had to be worth a drive up the M40?

It is. And for that matter, down the M6 to the M42 or along the M4 and up. Or train it to Oxford and splash out on a cab. You get the idea. The Double Red Duke is worth the trip. Inside the sprawling pub is a network of interlocking, low-ceilinged rooms, at the heart of which is an open kitchen full of live-fire grills, edged by a wide counter. Book a seat there, then stare into the embers and think about where your life went so right. Or make for one of the foliated dining rooms with their plump green banquettes and the odd rust-coloured sofa, of a sort a food coma might pin you to at the end of the meal.



The kitchen under Sandiford seems committed to getting the named dishes right, rather than reinventing the wheel, to give it unwanted corners. The closest thing to innovation is a brilliant green broad bean mash with garlic, lemon, tahini and olive oil, drizzled with chilli sauce, though even that is hardly revolutionary. Hummus, made with broad beans rather than chickpeas, turns up all over the shop. It's a dollop of punchy loveliness and comes with heat-blistered flatbread straight off the grill. Those breads demand to be torn apart and sniffed deeply before being put to work.

Then there are the devilled kidneys. Oh, the devilled kidneys. I order them regularly, more in hope than expectation. Often it feels like one of those recipes that, over the years, has become a faded photocopy of itself. Here, the image is crystal clear. The generous pile of plump lambs' kidneys for £9 still have a blush of pink at their heart. The deep pond of sauce, soaking into the slice of sourdough beneath, is the rich, sticky, cayenne-spiked wonder it should be. Anthony Trollope, who referenced them in his novels, would nod approvingly.



Unsurprisingly, given the Hawksmoor DNA, steaks are at the heart of the menu: prime rib, porterhouse and T-bone with sauces many and various, including the anchovy-boosted wonder that is Gentleman's Relish. Prices are a good 25% lower per 100g than Hawksmoor's. Alongside those, there's both a whole turbot, and a sturdy 350g cut cooked on the bone for £35. It is a terrific piece of fish shown due care and attention. The only down note of the meal is the tub of lemon ketchup accompanying it. Calling it ketchup doesn't change the fact that it tastes like lemon curd; a rather good lemon curd, but lemon curd all the same. It's not the condiment this fish needs, or any other fish for that matter.

I have £18-worth of thick veal chop on the bone, topped with deep-fried oysters and a big mess of tartar sauce sprinkled in turn with the vivid orange of egg mimosa. It is all delightfully on point. We order salt and vinegar dripping chips, because it would seem rude not to. They are everything you might wish them to be: properly crisp, rustling against each other like dried leaves in autumn, sprightly with vinegar. The fact I do not have space for them, that I am forced to leave room for dessert in your service, makes me sad. You ask too much of me sometimes, you people. There's a bowl of steamed spinach to make us feel virtuous.



Desserts at £9 include a sticky toffee pudding and a white chocolate cheesecake. We share a strawberry ripple sundae, and it is all the gleeful, childhood seaside things those three words promise. We fight each other for the ribbons of icy strawberry, striating the vanilla cream. Outside, beyond the car park, is a set of newly built rooms, in golden Scandi shades of wood. I find myself imagining coming here for the night, letting the kitchen do their thing, and then stumbling across to bed. The [menu](#) at the Double Red Duke reads as an unfussy version of pub food. It even includes a cow pie. But the simplicity of the words on that page barely begin to tell the story. It's a class act, redemptive scallop and all.