



EATING OUT

Giles Coren reviews Ave Mario

'Lunch was a disaster. Was it the kitchen, the hype, my ungrateful children – or being sat at the worst table, next to the bogs?'

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Well, that was a disaster. Not a disaster like the Hindenburg or the withdrawal from Kabul. Just a meal. Only a lunch. But lunch is my job. Lunch is my life. And when it all goes wrong, well, one has to report that too, and so I'm sitting here in the aftermath, wondering how to describe it. Was it their fault or was it mine? Was it the kitchen, the hype, the ills of the modern age . . . Or was it, perhaps, my ungrateful bloody children? Either way, it was a catastrophe and . . . oh, the humanity!

It didn't have to be this way. We didn't have to go for lunch at all. Sure, I had a review to write, and it had to be today, because tomorrow is something else, and the day after that is . . . Well, none of that matters now, does it? But I could just have written up the Double Red Duke in Clanfield, couldn't I?

The Double Red Duke is a brand spanking new pub from Sam and Georgie Pearman, whose Swan at Ascott-under-Wychwood I raved up here last year and whose involvement in a number of pubs in Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire has always been, unquestionably, a good thing. The DRD is big. Really big. Full of elegant nooks and crannies and sprawling dining rooms and secluded private eating spaces, stuffed with gorgeous furniture, and connected by impossibly lovely corridors all done over, in the way of so many old coaching inns recently, to evoke a dreamy world of rural eating and drinking so sleek and sexy that it could never have existed. As if the 18th century were on Instagram.

There's a wonderful long kitchen full of burning charcoal and turning spits, legs and shoulders of things, whole chickens (Richard Turner of Pitt Cue and Hawksmoor was involved at one point but no longer is, as is often the way) and a number of airy dining rooms stuffed with kitsch bits and pieces and a pervading sense of comfort.

Kitty and Sam and I dropped in for Sunday lunch and had good deep-fried scampi and a crab and shrimp salad and then roasts of beef (good and juicy), pork (a little dry) and monkfish (always at its best over charcoal) with good roast potatoes (that could have been even crispier, if you ask Sam) and prime Yorkshires for dipping in the madeira sauce, but I just thought, "Meh, it's good, but it's only Sunday lunch. If I'm going to do this gaff properly, I should come back when the à la carte is on. And anyway, Sam Pearman is a mate. I do his places every time they open. It looks a bit fishy. I should by all means let my readers know that if they are out this way, the Double Red Duke is a class operation, but for an actual review I should really do somewhere."