

Food & drink

Jay Rayner on restaurants

Levanter Fine Foods: restaurant review

In pursuit of a perfect steak, Jay heads to Ramsbottom where he finds fabulous Spanish cooking at amazing prices

Jay Rayner

Sunday 9 August 2015
06.00 BST



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Spanish flyer: the wooden bar hung with chorizos. Photograph: Gary Calton for the Observer

10 Square Street, Ramsbottom, Lancashire (No bookings) Meal for two, including drinks and service: £70

Back in 2009 I made a pilgrimage to a restaurant in the Basque hills outside San Sebastian called [Etxebarri](#). At that point it was ignored by most of the guides and yet it had become something of a cult for the way the single-minded chef, Bitor Arguinoniz, insisted on cooking everything over wood - even the cream for the ice cream. It has taken until now, with the opening of the likes of [Kitty Fisher's](#) and [John Doe](#) in London, for the doctrine of wood smoke to waft over to the capital and beyond.

During my meal at Etxebarri I was served the best steak I had eaten, either before or since. It had an extraordinary depth of flavour and a texture that balanced tension with tenderness. After the meal I rushed down to the kitchen to find out what exotic, rare breed this meat had come from. Bitor - it's Basque for Victor - smiled and said: "It's a 16-year-old Galician ex-milker." You what? Great steaks are meant to come from animals that have been pampered and fretted over all their life and slaughtered in their prime; not from old grandmas who have lactated their last.

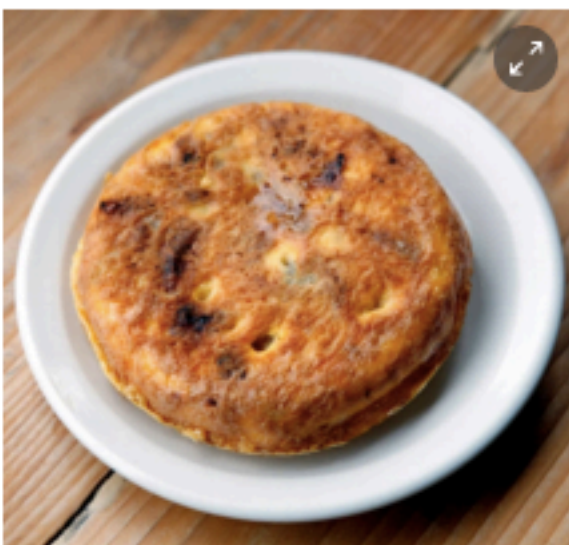


📷 'There are familiar dishes, but all are done with care and attention': ungreasy padrón peppers Photograph: Gary Calton for the Observer



Back in London, I talked to [Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck](#), who said he'd had a similar experience nearby, except his had come from a 22-year-old. He muttered about trying to hunt down the oldest dairy herd in Britain (the search would be limited by the fact that there is nothing in this country from before 1996, owing to the BSE crisis and mass slaughters that took place).

Nothing appeared to come of the Fat Duck search. But fast forward to 2015 and steaks from Galician ex-milkers are finally available in Britain, though at a serious price. At Kitty Fisher's in London's Mayfair, a ribeye for two will cost around £90, including service. High-end butcher's [Turner and George](#), who run the concession in Selfridges on Oxford Street, also have it. There, it sells for £45 a kilo or £80 a kilo for steaks, though it costs less ordered online or at their shop in Clerkenwell. But then you have to do all the cooking and washing up.



📷 'It has a pert wobble to it, and when cut into leaks buttercup-yellow yolk over the plate': the tortilla. Photograph: Gary Calton for the Observer



So a restaurant where you can get a one kilo lump of Galician ex-milker for £45 is worth knowing about. That restaurant is the Basque-influenced [Levanter Fine Foods](#) in Ramsbottom, half an hour's drive north of Manchester, where since June it has been offered as a special on Sundays only. They don't take bookings; you just have to turn up and take your chances. I went on a Friday lunchtime, quietly hopeful that they might be able to crack out the specials a couple of days early. It was not to be. Joe Botham, who opened the place with his partner Fiona 18 months ago, told me the delivery hadn't come yet. "And in any case they're cut so thick they need three to four hours to come to room temperature before we grill them." I will just have to come back on a Sunday, for which plans have already been made.

Because, going on almost everything else I ate there, Levanter is to be trusted with the very best of beef. Before opening the restaurant Joe and Fiona ran a street-food operation knocking out large amounts of paella, and Joe topped up his income as a Flamenco guitarist. This displayed a serious commitment to all things Spanish,

though it's not necessarily proof of the ability to run a restaurant. No worries; they know what they're doing.

Levanter is a split-level affair. There are wooden floors and balustrades with a bar at the front, loaded with jugs of readymade sangria. Muslin-bagged hams and thick lengths of prime chorizo and other charcuterie dangle overhead, resting gently at room temperature in a way that would make health and safety people brilliantly nervy. Stairs lead to a raised area and the open kitchen built around the grill, where Joe, all big shoulders, bald pate and red beard, tends the fire. It's the kind of restaurant where you could lose a night to the food and the booze and the vibe, and return home with half your dinner down your shirt. Or perhaps that's just me.



📷 'So fresh that the garlic butter-grilled flesh slips from the shell like a depilated calf from a silk stocking': the lobster. Photograph: Gary Calton for the Observer



There are familiar dishes, but all are done with care and attention: ungreasy padrón peppers for £4.50, plates of the best hams and chorizos. The thick, individual tortilla has a pert wobble to it, and when cut into leaks buttercup-yellow yolk over the plate and across the squares of potato that still retain their bite and shape. A thick piece of hake, the gently fishiest of fish, has crisp skin and pearly flesh and comes on a purée of sundried tomatoes and olives, which gives it heft and muscle.

Half a lobster, landed at Whitby the night before, is so fresh that the garlic butter-grilled flesh slips from the shell like a depilated calf from a silk stocking. It is the best of ingredients treated with the maximum of respect. There is a pile of rocket leaves dressed with a little olive oil, with slices of charcuterie cut from those we had seen hanging over the bar.



Roasted fig



At ordering, we are told that the Moroccan spiced pork ribs will be served last because they aren't yet ready. They still aren't ready when they reach us. The spicing - low notes of harissa and big hits of cumin - is fabulous, but the meat just hasn't got to that point where it is going to yield its connection to the bone without a fight. I felt jealous of those who, later in the day, would get them in their prime.

The bottom of the blackboard menu lists fresh roasted figs, which we take to be a move towards dessert, but no. These are split open to reveal their filthy purple innards and are roasted with a salty garlic and hazelnut butter, placing them in an intriguing space between savoury and sweet. It's an idea I shall be nicking for dinner parties.

The baked lemon cheesecake is a hearty affair that needs a bit of cream to send it on its way. That's less a criticism than an observation.

We run up a bill of £60 without any booze, but with the lobster, which at £15 is the most expensive thing on the menu. Levanter Fine Foods is the kind of restaurant so many of us seek, where frill and pomp have been dispensed with in favour of feeding people well. I'll be back for my slab

of old moo cow shortly.

Jay's new bites

- I travelled some distance to get to Levanter. Closer to home, at the unsexy end of Acre Lane in London's Brixton (and with a second branch in Battersea) is Boqueria. All the standards are present and correct, but the extensive menu and the ever-changing list of specials can throw up unexpected pleasures. They also run special events, including Sunday lunches to celebrate the arrival of the calçot, a kind of baby leek, grilled over the BBQ (boqueriatapas.com).

- Following the recent closure of dismal Belgian mussel-and-chips joint Leon de Bruxelles in London, to be replaced by a McDonald's, comes news that British-born mussel group Belgo is expanding again. It has opened a branch in Soho not far from where Leon de Bruxelles closed (belgo-restaurants.co.uk).

- Website find of the week: sconesjamandcream.com, a resource for anybody obsessed with afternoon tea, and not wanting to work their way through eight dozen websites to find the good stuff. There are reviews, offers and a truly national reach which now includes the Betty's group in Yorkshire.

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