

KATHERINE MACALISTER visits the recently revamped Red Lion in Blewbury and is completely won over

There must be a memo that goes around predicting what food is going to be trendy, what colours to paint their walls, how to decorate and what ingredients to use.

Last year it would have demanded grey 'downpipe' paint, an open bar/dining/kitchen area and slate mats. Now only Farrow and Ball's eggshell blue will do, adorned with moose heads, reclaimed furniture, retro plates, enamel bowls, flocked wallpaper and tweed cushions.

Not that we should complain, because while village boozers on the whole used to be tarnished affairs which smelt of beer, bleach, salt and vinegar crisps, blue toilet blocks, polish and sticky carpets, which says more about my parents than perhaps they would wish, the good ones were few and far between.

Now every decent village needs a good gastro pub to provide our new leisure activity – eating.

When driving over to inspect the newly revamped Red Lion in Blewbury I therefore expected more of the same and was delighted to find that while charming, it wasn't as 'done' as its more affected establishments. And for this I loved it.

Once I'd finished my lunch however, my heart was truly won over. Any cares about catchments, frosted panes or painted cladding disappearing straight out of The Red Lion's 17th century windows.

The food was as honest as the refurb actually.

Two rooms, the first a slightly stiff, cramped dining room, lacking the Hygge style interior favoured by its more pretentious counterparts.

The second a real bar with a blazing fire, stuffed full of locals having lunch, rather than 'hanging out in the country.'

My favourite part however were the thatched walls outside, something I've never witnessed before, which lead you from the car park to the pub entrance.

The heartening menu included liver with bacon and onion gravy, sausage and mash and fish and chips; proper pub food produced by



The Red Lion Pub and Kitchen in Blewbury has recently been revamped and is now a great little foodie destination

A very saucy affair

The post lunch walk was understandably vigorous thanks to our vast repast

head chef Phil Wild.

And although there was the odd 'trendy' addition – pigs cheeks, frogs legs, the majority was traditional fare.

The promise of a walk afterwards which starts on the pub doorstep, enables you to eat to your heart's

content. We ate in the dining room, alone, and it took me a while to warm to the slightly antiquated colours and furnishings, not an Ercol chair, chintz sofa or mismatched dinner service in sight.

There were eight of us for lunch so I won't bore you with everything we ate. But the Cornish mussels in a garlic cream sauce with chips (£13.95) were heavenly – simple, very French with plenty of sauce and flavour and devoured by the kids.

Wild mushroom soup served in a jug with crusty bread (£4.95) was thick and warming, the goats cheese bruschetta with beetroot jam and caramelised walnut (goats cheese it seems will never go out of fashion) meltingly soft against the crunch of the nuts and bread, some glorious fish and chips in a light, crispy batter and pea puree.

The ravioli with ricotta cheese, spinach and wild mushrooms spiked with chilli (£12.95) was masterful; the pasta just the right balance of bite and softness.

Hake with buttered samphire and a creamy rich anchovy and tomato sauce (£14.95) was indecently good.

The flavour combinations were brilliant, nothing too fussy, the ingredients speaking for themselves, the sauces divine.

But the puddings defied belief. Try these for size and tell me your mouth's not watering: bread and butter pudding with frothy custard (which came served in a jug and was so delicious I wanted to retire



The delicious Cornish mussels in a garlic cream sauce with chips

to the nursery for ever and eat nothing else).

Custard tart with poached rhubarb or, vanilla seed creme brulee, all of which we sampled, exclaimed over and clapped each other on the back.

The post lunch walk was understandably vigorous, challenging and over-zealous thanks to our vast repast, the beautiful winter's day framing the Ridgeway behind.

The Red Lion is a great little discovery then, but leave your airs and graces behind, because they don't need them, thatch or no thatch.

THE PARTICULARS:

The Red Lion Pub and Kitchen
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Didcot
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theredlionpubandkitchen.co.uk
01235 850403

Parking: large car park at back

Try the: Two Course, Steak & Lobster Night, every Wednesday with Prosecco £19.95
Two Course, Mussel Madness, every Monday Night- £15.95



The vanilla seed creme brulee was one of the many delicious desserts