

In the depths of Wiltshire

13 Mar 2010 by Nick Lander/ FT

I set off for The Beckford Arms, in the depths of Wiltshire, with two specific questions for its chef, Mark Blatchford, whose food I had always previously enjoyed in both London and New York. Why had he suddenly left the big smoke and what did he miss most in his new, more tranquil setting?

The 30- minute drive from uplifting Salisbury Cathedral provided immediate answers to the first question. We drove past calming woods; peaceful fields of sheep; much more surprisingly, fields full of llamas; the magnificent arch at the entrance to the Fonthill Estate; as well as a lake and vista that would provide a perfect setting for the adaptation of any Jane Austen novel.

The Beckford Arms itself is somewhat less engaging, however. This former coaching inn on the edge of the estate was recently converted into a restaurant with a bar and rooms. It's a broad, rather charmless building that faces on to a far more picturesque thatched house but contains, most surprisingly, an elegant staircase that divides a comfortable sitting room from the bar and the restaurant beyond. The aroma of burning logs and freshly smoked food hangs in the air while closer to the ground dogs and small children seem to be everywhere.

After a lunch of a twice- baked goats cheese soufflé and a creamy, rhubarb and ginger fool, punctuated by a comparative tasting of two local beers, Butcombe and Keystone, I spotted an immediate physical change in Blatchford since he opened here. Although as smartly dressed in his chef's whites as he would have been in any of his former positions at Claridge's, Soho House in London and New York or at Racine in Knightsbridge, Blatchford looked much slimmer.

'It's not as easy to find cooks here as it is in London', he responded, patting his stomach, after I pointed this out, 'so I'm having to work a lot more shifts than I used to. But I love it.'

Part of this pleasure derives from simply being closer to two farmers, in particular. While one provides him with eggs and dairy products, the other breeds the distinctive Red Poll cattle that make for excellent steaks and burgers and also sells him the cheaper cuts that go into the popular cottage pie and steak and kidney pudding on the bar menu.

But two far more subtle differences affect how Blatchford and his young brigade actually prepare the food.

'The biggest change is simply having far more space. Rents in London and New York are so high that every inch of the kitchen is mapped out. It's not like that here. We installed a grill in the kitchen, which we call The Beast because of the heat it generates now that we use proper charcoal from the Dorset Charcoal Company. It's proved very popular but it's so powerful it needs a lot of room.'

The bar also provides extra cooking space. On top of the reconstructed fireplace, Blatchford installed a spit that on the Saturday night was roasting a couple of chickens. Provided they were not ordered there and then, they would subsequently find their way into chicken and leek pies. The chimney itself held other secrets.

Blatchford explained that for some time now he has been smoking his own bacon, pork belly and hams up the chimney overnight. Combining these ingredients with pigeon breasts smoked in a hot smoker he built for the kitchen, and quince from the quince trees in the garden, produced a memorable first course at dinner that evening of hot smoked pigeon breasts, chimney smoked bacon, baked quince and walnut dressing, in which only the last ingredient was from outside his new domain. Equally impressive, and good value, were a poached leg of mutton with creamed leeks and capers (£11) and a bottle of 2005 Gevrey Chambertin, En Jouse from Harmand Geoffroy (£40).

The other great advantage of the country for Blatchford is that it provides an immediate antidote to the stress of a busy kitchen. 'When things get a little bit fraught here, I can just tell one or two of the chefs to walk out of the back door, take a stroll and calm down. It's very effective. I know because I've done it myself. And you definitely can't do that in London', he added.

But in the country Blatchford cannot so easily enjoy what he most liked about living in north London - simply walking out of his flat, meeting up with friends and choosing one of the many cooking styles on offer in the capital, eating well and learning from them. Now he has to finesse his kitchen rota so that he can take the train and not be missed for the day. He also has to plan, far more carefully, his precious hours as a customer so that he can keep up to the minute with what's going on.

Blatchford sees this as only a minor disadvantage in his long- term plans, however. With his two partners, Charlie Luxton and Dan Brod, he has converted a formerly closed pub into a thriving restaurant with eight bedrooms that are comfortable, well priced and come with their own range of toiletries created by Chloë Luxton. Their plan now is to find four more pubs over the next few years, although Blatchford is adamant that one, at least, has to be in London so that he is never too far away from its restaurants.

The Beckford Arms, www.beckfordarms.com