

Shaun Hill revives The Walnut Tree Inn

18 Jan 2008 by JR

As an antidote to the heavy rain outside, the sight of the couple behind the bar at the recently re-opened Walnut Tree Inn outside Abergavenny in Wales could not have been more heart-warming. They were a waitress and a chef who between them have over 75 years experience in the restaurant business yet have only been working together for the past three weeks.

Pauline McKay started here in 1972, nine years after Franco and Ann Taruschio first opened what, until they sold in 2001, was one of the most idiosyncratic eating establishments in the UK. While McKay and her colleagues supplied the Welsh hospitality, Franco cooked the Italian food of his beloved Marche region as well as the definitive rendition of many local dishes, later strongly influenced by Asian influences after they had adopted a Thai daughter. Ann provided the no-nonsense management.

The chef by Pauline's side today is Shaun Hill who until a few years ago was the chef/proprietor of The Merchant House in nearby Ludlow, Shropshire. Hill first learnt to cook under the late Robert Carrier in Islington, north London, in 1968 for a weekly wage so low that he still winces when remembering it.

Pauline, Janet and Val, all waitresses from the Taruschio era, and Hill have been brought together by the local Griffiths family. Alun Griffiths, on the back of a successful building business which has also led him to restore The Angel Hotel in Abergavenny, was prepared to finance the necessary work The Walnut Tree required once he realised that his son, William, who had worked for Hill in Ludlow, would look after the management of the restaurant. Their collaboration has been enhanced by that of William's wife, whose local art gallery has provided the restaurant's paintings, and his sister who has designed the cover for the menu and wine list tastefully, if not surprisingly, using the leaves of a walnut tree.

All this was enough to convince Hill to accept their invitation to join. "The building required an awful lot of work which they were prepared to pay for," Hill said, "and honestly I have no idea what it cost. But there's a new roof, under-floor heating and air conditioning." The simple layout of the dining room has sensibly not been complicated and, although the lavatories are still in an annexe outside, they are nowhere near as spartan as they once were.

The restaurant has now been set up as a separate business with Hill and William Griffiths as equal partners but it has already become far more of a challenge than Hill expected it to be.

"When I originally agreed to come here I thought it would be similar to the other places I have been involved in as a consultant such as The Glasshouse in Worcester or Fortnum & Mason. I knew I would definitely be working here two to three days a week but I expected to be able to put in a Head Chef who would look after things on a day-to-day basis. But I realise after only three weeks that this is impossible. This place needs a presence. It has a funny aura about it, unlike any other place I have ever worked before. I now know I have to be here full-time."

This presence seems to have been greeted with wide approval by all those who once ate here, judging by the full tables all around me last week with the restaurant acting almost as a physical Friends Reunited for its customers as they came over to talk to one another.

Hill has always been a distinctive chef. Born in Belfast, the son of a Catholic mother and Protestant father, he studied classics at Exeter University and still lectures there on food in the ancient world and food taboos in particular. "It's fun having spent 50-60 hours a week burning your hands in the kitchen to look into these topics that are enigmatic but still connected with food and pleasure," he assured me.

His cooking style he modestly describes as 'shopping based' but while this is not that different from so many others today, what distinguishes Hill today is his age, experience and how he has spent the money he has earned as a chef.

Sixty last year and a grandfather, Hill has cooked to travel and wherever he has visited has invariably yielded either a recipe, a combination of ingredients or a new method of cooking. What links The Walnut Tree's successful past to its promising future is not just the experience in the kitchen but the confidence to realise just what will work well together and why.

Scallop tartare with scallop won ton fritters is a dish Hill first encountered in Switzerland at an hotel inherited by someone who had worked in the Far East and returned to with his Chinese wife. Another starter of calf's sweetbreads with wine-braised sauerkraut was eaten and enjoyed by Hill in Munich last Christmas. Travels to the US have yielded that old New Orleans favourite, oyster beignets, served here with smoked bacon and dandelion leaves while the seared monkfish with ginger, garlic and tomato is his variation on a dish he once ate at Jeremiah Towers' restaurant Stars in San Francisco. Mackerel with *ras el hanout* (a blend of cardamom, cinnamon, rosebuds and coriander) and chickpeas came from another trip, this time to North Africa.

Then there are the dishes that have been accumulated as he has cooked his way round the UK. The classic calves' brains with brown butter has, much to Hill's surprise, become his most popular first course. A saddle of hare with celeriac; partridge with a chestnut stuffing; wild duck with morel mushrooms and a megrim sole, caught off the Cornish coast, with a watercress beurre blanc are other popular dishes in his repertoire. A trademark deftness of touch was best exemplified in two puddings: a savoury first course incorporating parsnip and truffles and a more delicate dessert of buttermilk with the first of the new season's rhubarb.

The flavours of these dishes would count for nothing, Hill readily admits, if he were to lose sight of three other factors that essentially contributed to the restaurant's success in the past.

The first is an informality of style evident not just in the menu but also in the enterprising wine list Hill has written with several wines available by the 35cl carafe since half-bottles are so difficult to find. This informality will also be extended to ensuring that not all the tables are booked on the busiest nights to accommodate walk-ins and to keeping the bar area available for those who just want a drink and a single dish. Then there is the question of price, crucial in the countryside, and the importance of offering what Hill describes as 'a reasonable deal'. [Starters are around £7 each while main courses are in the high teens. Set lunch is £15 for two courses £20 for three – JR in response to Danny Jermann's [comments on the forum](#) about Le Café Anglais.]

Finally, there is the inestimable value to a newcomer such as himself of Pauline, Janet and Val who have, he explained, 'been really good news and seem to know how all the old customers like to be treated before they have even sat down.'

It was most unusual, as I sat by the exit, to see and hear the customers as they left thanking the waitresses far more profusely for their enjoyable evening than the man in the chef's uniform. But with Hill at the helm The Walnut Tree Inn burns brightly once more.

The Walnut Tree Inn, www.thewalnuttreeinn.com

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