

## The Box Tree, Ilkley, at 50

23 Jun 2012 by Tom Lewis

*This is the last of our [readers' restaurant reviews](#). Tom Lewis is also the [Cambridge Wine Blogger](#). We'll be announcing the winner of that Mouton '96 very soon...*

It was a day of contrasts during a weekend away in rural Yorkshire, with the drive taking us through some of the more charmless and run-down parts of the Leeds–Bradford hinterland.

On a bank holiday weekend in June in the north of England, rain was not unexpected but, with temperatures in wintry single figures, we sought refuge in the National Media Museum where #1 child got to read an autocue while #2 child was captivated by the early-80s video games of my youth.

Then, after a short but very scenic drive through the respectable suburb of Hawksworth, past the Cow and Calf rocks of Ilkley Moor, we dropped down into genteel Ilkley to see the first signs of any Jubilee celebration, the town centre being closed off for a parade or street party of some sort.

I first took Mrs CWB (plus #1 child) to The Box Tree in Ilkley almost a decade ago on the recommendation of a colleague who grew up in the area and simply suggested it as being 'quite nice'. Deciding a return visit was in order on this trip, I checked out the website and learnt that a certain stock-cube-loving celebrity chef learnt his craft here and is now a part-owner. I also learnt that the restaurant has a Michelin star and is celebrating its 50th anniversary.

With two small children in tow, our only option was a Sunday lunchtime for the fixed-price set menu of four courses.

The Box Tree itself is located in an incongruous 1720s farmhouse on the main A65 in the centre of Ilkley. The interior, plush, domestic and chintzy, is equally incongruous and unashamedly old-fashioned without any trace of irony - as is the welcome, and service in general. On arrival we are seated upstairs and order a tangy, pungent manzanilla to go with the hors d'oeuvres while we peruse the menu and wine list.

The children devour the cheese straws while I pick at the olives, which are good but seem to have come out of a jar. I find the wasabi peanuts rather overpowering, but the cream cheese with white truffle oil is delicious.

As I am driving and we have ordered very different main courses, we decide on wines by the glass and arrange for the children's meals to be brought along with our starters.

As we move downstairs to our table, the children's part-finished drinks are brought through, but for some reason the adults' are not. Bread rolls are brought round and we have a choice of caramelised red onion or pesto - I try both and find they are equally delicious, one of the high points of the meal.

With the starters mainly a choice of simple 'arrangements' of good, well-matched ingredients, the mains being traditional roasts or a fish option, the Michelin-star quality is clearly focused on the pre-dessert and the dessert itself. So, my boudin blanc and egg en crouete is a straightforward but well-executed egg-and-black-pudding-on-toast, lifted above the everyday with the addition of a superb reduced red-wine-and-stock jus. Mrs CWB's pea and white truffle oil veloute is equally straightforward - but even more full of flavour.

The main course of traditional Sunday roast beef dinner has a few extra touches - a creamy cheese sauce with the broccoli, the carrots roasted with aromatic herbs and a really tasty jus (or gravy as they say oop north) - that are deftly executed and just right, even if there is nothing particularly innovative or surprising about it all.

My wine choice, a Vila Vicosa, Pontual Syrah 2004 from Portugal, proves a superb match and cuts through the richness of the meal with its cool, rounded, prominent acidity and soft tannins. It is, apparently, one of their most popular wines and, although the idealist in me would prefer to see something indigenous from Portugal, I can see why. Restrained, balanced and well-made, it is perfect for restaurant food. It also has a touch of Portuguese character that I can't quite put a finger on but is immediately distinguishable from a more international style of Syrah or Shiraz.

The roasted sea bass with vegetables is lighter and more cleanly presented, but Mrs CWB finds the vegetables just a little too firm and the dish on the whole more workmanlike than really special. Her Languedoc Figaro Vermentino with a touch of Sauvignon in the blend is equally well-made - crisp and poised with refreshing acidity and a persistent, mineral finish.

By this point, child #1 has tucked away all her main course, especially enjoying the Yorkshire puddings, while child #2 -

who fell asleep on the drive over and hasn't really recovered his usual good humour - has barely touched his. We decide to order a pudding for still-hungry child and leave not-eating child with a few cars to brum quietly on the table under a watchful eye.

The pre-dessert is another high-point; a pineapple sorbet, topped with foamed crème fraiche served in a shot glass; it is clever, elegant, refreshing and delicious. But, more than that, it is just what the palate needs at this point in the meal.

We have all opted for the same dessert from the menu - a lemon tart with blood-orange sorbet - so there is no swapping of plates or trading of spoonfuls, but rather we tuck in to the individual-sized tarts garnished with fresh grapefruit, blood orange pieces and home-made candied peel. The sorbet is tart, sweet and refreshing; the pastry firm rather than melting; and the lemon filling is light with just the right balance of sweetness and sharpness. The raw fruit with the cooked dessert works surprisingly well with the crunchy bitter-sweetness of the candied peel lifting it all above the merely traditional and textbook.

The requirement to drive back to our hotel means that I have to turn down a dessert wine - in better weather I could have relied on strolling up to Ilkley Moor to walk the effects off - and we also opt to forgo coffee and petits fours as the children are getting a little restless.

The chocolates, I remember from our previous visit, are served from an elegant wooden box and feature flavours from the usual lemon or praline to the novel chili or tobacco.

The great lunches of my memory extend lazily over numerous courses, dragging themselves out over the best part of an afternoon, prolonging the relaxed, basking glow of wellbeing - the anticipation of the amuse bouche and starter, the main event followed by seemingly endless add-ons as much to avoid ending the occasion as to provide repast.

As anyone with small children will know, such lunches are indulgences of the highest order - for reasons of time more than gluttony. And although no fan of the molecular gastronomy, food-as-theatre school of thought, I do believe that really great meals need to have an element of the unexpected at every turn - unusual flavours, ingredients or presentation that enhances but neither detracts from nor overshadows the food itself.

On this scale, a Sunday lunch at the Box Tree sits firmly in the middle ground. That the food is all perfectly cooked from good-quality ingredients and served flawlessly is merely a starting point. Some elements - the breads, pre-dessert, and wine matches - transcend this, while others - the simple starters and traditional mains - are box-tickers that do very well what is required, but no more.

And although the specific details have now passed from memory, this is how I recall our earlier visit, too - very good on the basics with occasional moments of genius.

The CWB rule-of-thumb on restaurants is that more than one visit is good and three makes it really special. With two down but a third neither ruled out nor yet planned, I think that just about sums it up - not quite very good indeed.