

## A welcome, and welcoming, new Tavern

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Experience in the restaurant business manifests itself in various forms.

There are those whose broad girth matches the commonly held image of the jolly chef or restaurateur, although today most in the profession tend to be young, thin and physically very fit.

Then there are those who, over the years, have developed an eye for taking in the 'bones' of a building and, however unprepossessing it may look, converting it into not just something special but also into a something that perfectly matches its history - in this case one that stretches back 120 years.

This is the magic that restaurateurs Nigel Sutcliffe and Jerome Armit have just woven together with chef Peter Weeden. Collectively they have spent 70 years working in numerous restaurants and have just transformed what was a branch of the Ping Pong dim sum chain into the Newman Street Tavern.

I had eaten here in its former incarnation when its interior was rather dark and gloomy but I could not recognise the place on my return. The false ceiling on the ground floor has been removed to reveal four large windows that make it feel as welcoming as any tavern should be. Behind the bar is a list of the shellfish that constitute the seafood platter, including British prawns, Whitstable and West Mersea oysters, mussels, clams and winkles. Close by in the window is a tray of colourful, unplucked plovers and woodcock, waiting to be ordered, a display that gives this section the air of a butcher's shop from a bygone era.

On the wall leading up to the first-floor dining room, a series of photos and drawings, principally seascapes and landscapes, link Weeden's kitchen even closer to his suppliers. As he explained, 'We want to align our working lives with all of those who deliver to us. This is a mutually beneficial relationship.'

Upstairs is slightly more comfortable and spacious but the partners have not yet decided whether to offer two separate menus. 'We've been open only a couple of months and we'll wait to see how customers decide they want to use the different spaces', Sutcliffe added.

In taking this position, Sutcliffe draws on years of experience, including a long stint alongside Heston Blumenthal in the very first years of The Fat Duck. Other restaurants followed (hence his thin physique), sometimes with Armit at his side, before an introduction to James Mclean, a fourth partner, and Richard Fulford-Smith, their financial backer, led Sutcliffe to the conclusion that their combined wisdom could provide the management expertise any chef keen to establish his name would need. Weeden, after eight years at The Paternoster Chop House by St Paul's, was the man for Newman Street and they have just entered into a similar working relationship with another chef, Matt Reuther, to re-launch the Princess Victoria in Shepherd's Bush.

Their choice of the word 'tavern' precisely describes everything that their collective experience now delivers. It is fun, comfortable and comforting with the menu and wine list full of charms and surprises. And it was one line of the clearly printed menu that immediately brought a gasp of delight from one of our well-travelled French guests.

'Roast woodcock', he exclaimed, adding immediately, 'that's for me', before explaining that these birds are no longer available on restaurant menus in France and quite how difficult they are to shoot.

Rosie, our well-briefed waitress, gave us a detailed breakdown of several of the dishes, including the Blackface lamb that comprised the slow-cooked breast, shoulder and shank of the animal in a barley broth. She also knew roughly where Brundish is, the town that supplies the onions for the onion tart first course, although she then pointed west instead of north-east (Brundish is in Norfolk).

The menu and wine list deliver the same quotient of pleasure but from very different design perspectives.

The former is a simple but clearly printed single sheet with descriptors as direct as the ensuing flavours of each dish. Crab on toast and also shredded into a rich bisque; clams with Welsh laver bread diced thinly on toast; and a meltingly

delicious smoked ham terrine with port jelly. Cod on a warm salad of kohlrabi and a gratin of Dublin Bay prawns and Helford river fish showed a deftness of touch.

Stars of the dessert menu were a tart made from Spanish Marcona almonds and a vanilla blancmange with rhubarb. A list of forthcoming attractions on the menu includes more woodcock, apples from Brogdale in Kent as well as Seville and blood oranges.

The leather-bound wine list initially looks somewhat more prosaic but in fact is broken down into some original headings such as 'A Tale of Two Rivers' (the Loire and the Rhône) and Sea & Ocean (wines made in maritime vineyards). We drank a full-bodied white Hatzidakis Aidani 2010 from Santorini, Greece (£47), and a 2007 Etna red from the over-delivering I Vigneri (£55). With a 50cl 2011 Maury Domaine Pouderoux (£32) from south-west France, our bill was £320 for four.

While Sutcliffe is delighted by how his latest tavern has been received, he also exhibited the caution that is another manifestation of experience. 'The clutch is engaged', he quipped. 'Now our job is to get it up to full speed.'

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*Photo by Todd Hart.*