

RESTAURANT REVIEW – The Old Volunteer at Caythorpe



Whenever a new restaurant opens in the area I feel duty bound to go and review it. You, the public, have a right to know. Of course, this can be problematical because you never know what you're going to get; it may be a scintillating fusion of superb food, dazzling interior design and impeccable service or, then again, it may be a complete disaster zone with no food, wine or remotest clue of what anyone is supposed to be doing.

What is more, it is no secret that the recession has been harder on restaurants than almost any other kind of business. Even Gordon Ramsay is watching some of his eateries go to the wall. To paraphrase Gordon Brown, and that is not something I am often inclined to do, this is no time for amateurs. So, for the Old Volunteer to open its doors at this point in time might seem a brave act and to promptly invite me to review the place could be viewed as positively foolhardy. Happily, this is not the case. You see, the people behind the Old Volunteer are anything but amateurs and they believe that right now there are opportunities aplenty for the savvy entrepreneur. In fact, the Old Volunteer is part of a fast growing chain but you don't need to worry about this, dispel any images of Burger King or Pizza Hut from your mind straight away.

Other restaurants in the chain are in Moreton-in-the-Marsh (which is a nice village in Gloucestershire) and Harpenden (which is a nice town in Hertfordshire) so it's no surprise to find them opening a restaurant in Caythorpe which is a nice village just outside Lowdham in Nottinghamshire. But is it a scintillating fusion or a complete disaster zone? Let's find out.

The building itself had lain empty for two years which is a shame because it's a nice old place. However, the new owners have brought in the interior designers to breathe new life into the rooms and they have done a fine job. The building is full of rustic charm coupled with contemporary colours and imaginative décor. It isn't just a restaurant either; it's a cool and laid back bar that does sterling duty as a local pub. In fact, it's so cool it even has a Dyson Airblade (the funkiest hand drier ever) in the Gents.

All the staff come from places like Australia, New Zealand and Canada. This is entirely a good thing, partly because they're all young, friendly and enthusiastic but also because, in my experience, all those countries could give good old Blighty a salutary lesson in how to deliver customer service. What is more, every one of them has been thoroughly trained, which meant that Alex, our young, friendly and enthusiastic waitress, knew everything there was to be known about every dish on the menu and every bottle on the wine

list. Talking about wine, we had a corking bottle of White Rioja, a much underrated wine in my view, which was a snip at £15.50. They do a whole range of good wines at this bargain price, a fine idea.

When I tell you that the menu features fancy fare such as Prawn Cocktail, Steak and Fish and Chips you will probably think that I've inadvertently wandered into a Harvester or some such place. You couldn't be more wrong. Yes the food is simple and honest, there isn't a caper in sight and you don't need a French dictionary to translate the menu. Yes it's good value; main courses start at £9.00 but, I have to tell you, this is as good food as any I've eaten in the past year. Penny tried the *Old Volunteer Prawn Cocktail* to start with, which is made with prawns, crayfish, crab and avocado and is totally misnamed; it should be called the *Old Volunteer Seafood Extravaganza* and that would be an understatement. I started with *Baltic beetroot cured salmon with lemon coriander crème fraiche and beetroot chutney*. This is very similar to Gravavlax; simple, straightforward and delicious.

Onto main courses and Penny went for *Confit duck leg with bubble and squeak, sour cherry compote and jus*. Once again the quality of the ingredients was the main thing, really first rate. I had *28 day dry aged 10oz rib-eye steak*. This was plainly served with *hand cut chips, grilled tomato and Café de Paris butter* and I can honestly say it was one of the best steaks I've ever eaten – fantastic!

We soldiered bravely on to desserts, *Chocolate Fondant* for me and *Banoffee Pie* for Penny. The quality and scrumminess continued unabated. Just a word about presentation; all the food served at the Old Volunteer looks sensational but the desserts are true works of art – obviously the pastry chef has too much time on his hands.

There you have it then, the Old Volunteer is excellent in every way. It deserves to succeed and I'm sure that it will and, as ever, you heard it here first.

Howard Clemmow

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With thanks to the gang for making us really welcome and serving us some sensational food.