

Just take your time

Helen Brown eases into slow motion for superb dining in Dunkeld . . .

SLOW FOOD is a global movement aiming to reconnect people with the pleasure of buying, preparing, eating and sharing good food. Its goals and methodology could hardly be more germane than at the present time when fast or highly-processed foods are coming under close scrutiny.

Perth became Scotland's first Cittaslow – Slow Food city – in 2007 and many local restaurateurs have joined the crusade for creating dishes that allow produce to speak for itself in terms of natural goodness and flavour.

The Atholl Arms Hotel in Dunkeld launched its monthly 'Grub With Us' evenings late last year, offering a beautifully composed taster menu on the first Thursday of every month. It's a striking building in a wonderful location – right on the banks of the Tay at the end of the bridge that leads into this justly famed beauty spot.

The hotel itself, built in 1833 in the Georgian style, is in the process of general and gradual refurbishment by owners Christine and Neil Sinclair. The public rooms, including the main lounge with its open fire and the River View Restaurant, with its outlook over the Tay from its high windows, are comfortable and impressive. And greeting guests at the door is an intriguing "tin man" metal sculpture of a piper, a conversation piece in itself.

Our en suite bedroom with a crisply made and very comfortable bed, was spacious and pristine, if a little old-fashioned in decor and style, which will probably be attended to in due course as the re-vamp continues throughout this attractive building of 17 bedrooms.

The River View Restaurant lives up to its billing as a

lovely setting and the food definitely outdoes itself. The 'Grub With Us' dinner menu may have an informal title and a laid-back approach but there's nothing casual about the skills on show. Head chef Eddie Atkinson has a sure touch with ingredients and a keen eye for combining textures and flavours in his imaginative menu planning. At £24 a head, it's also a steal, in anyone's terms, with five courses on offer and a choice of two dishes in each one. There were also delicious "extras", including home-made bread and dainty pots of pea and mint dip and tomato and onion salsa to get the palate going.

Carrot, honey and ginger soup was served in a glass, highlighting its golden colour; delicately yet densely flavoured, this

could have been on the sweet side but was savoury and aromatic.

I went for the layers of locally-smoked salmon – perfect on both taste and texture, with a zingy side salad that really opened up the flavour of this beautiful fish. My husband Neil, in the interests of making sure that we tried as many different dishes as possible, opted for the wild onion tart, pronouncing the pastry "melting" and the broad bean cream "inspired". He's a man who knows his way around a cooker and I could see him

storing up ideas all through this meal!

We both chose the halibut with

fennel and cockles, just a really fresh combination of top class ingredients, pure and simple and cooked to show off its strengths. There was also a roast vegetable gratin which I have to say looked and smelled lovely. And there was more.

The next course was no problem at all to me – I love liver, especially with truffle mash, so I had no hesitation in ordering this dish over the admittedly intriguing-sounding vegetarian option. Two ladies at the next table to us had that – walnut, chickpea and cranberry strudel with orange and roast beetroot salad – which looked amazing and was pronounced "absolutely delicious" by both. My husband's difficulty was that he cannot take cranberries and has a bit of an aversion to offal. I thought I was on to a good thing

here – two helpings of one of my favourites – when he opted to try the liver but my hopes were dashed when he described it as perfectly cooked and one of the best things he had ever eaten. Having two such unusual choices in this section of the menu was a bold decision but it paid off in every respect.

A generous selection of Scottish cheeses (Mull cheddar, Gruth Dubh, Strathdon Blue and Scottish brie) was served at the right temperature, with good oatcakes. I had the chocolate ganache tart, the George Clooney of desserts – rich, dark, gorgeous and more-ish.

The waiting staff were also uniformly excellent, helpful, speedy and charming. Special mention to the front of house manager who seemed to be everywhere at once and who kept a keen eye on the serving

of both dinner and breakfast.

That breakfast also lived up to expectations with plenty of fruit juices, cereals, toast and coffee etc on offer and a beautifully cooked piece of smoked haddock topped by a perfect poached egg.

This is definitely one of the best – and best value – affordable treats I have ever had. Slow food takes its time – but my advice is to get there quickly before everyone finds out!

● Slow Food dinners at the Atholl Arms Hotel take place

Oven roasted breast of corn fed chicken.

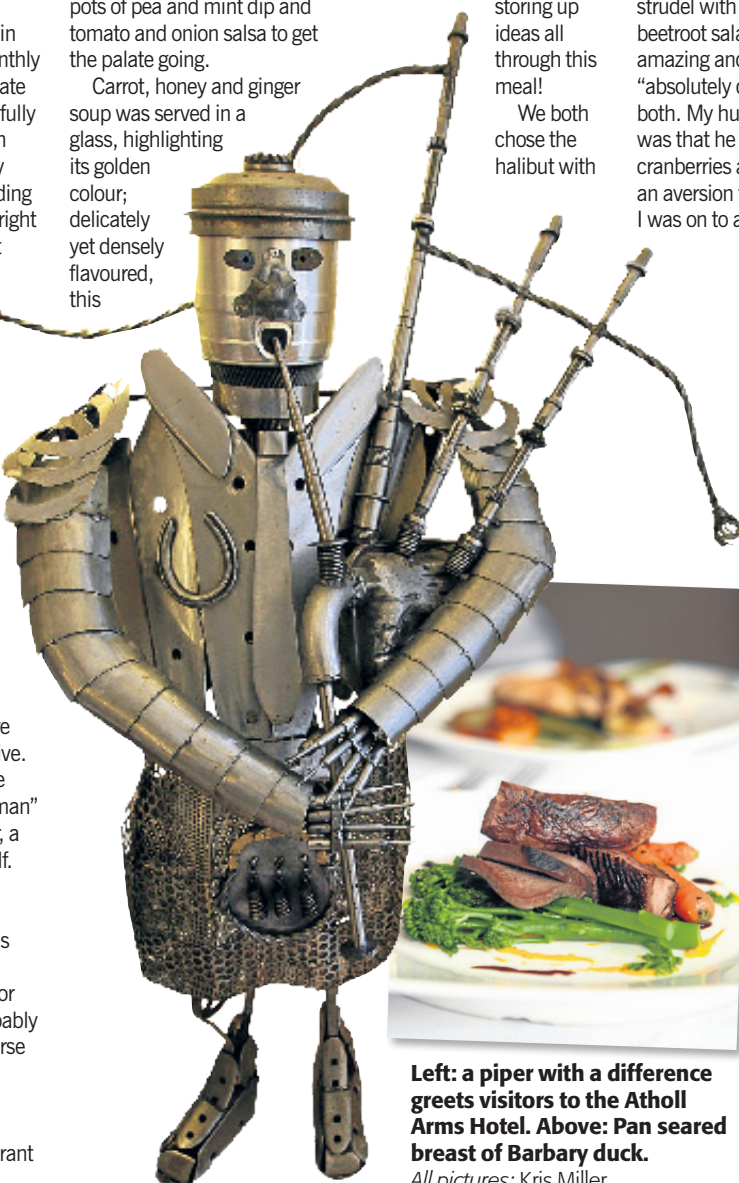


'GRUB WITH US' MENU

- Carrot, honey and ginger soup
- ◆◆◆◆◆
- Dunkeld smoked salmon layered mousse, caper, shallot, lemon and cherry tomato salad, micro herbs
- Wild onion tart, salad leaves and broad bean butter
- ◆◆◆◆◆
- Isle of Gigha halibut, braised fennel hearts, fennel puree, steamed cockles, leaves
- Roast vegetable gratin, thyme and cherry tomato compote, chopped salad
- ◆◆◆◆◆
- Pan-seared calves' liver, truffle mash, roasted shallots, tender stem broccoli, sweet-cured bacon, red wine butter sauce
- Walnut, chickpea and cranberry strudel, orange and roast beetroot salad
- ◆◆◆◆◆
- Chocolate ganache tart, tuile biscuits, vanilla bean cream, fresh berries
- Selection of Scottish cheeses

on the first Thursday of every month.

● Atholl Arms Hotel, Tay Terrace, Dunkeld PH8 0AQ. Tel: (01350) 727219. Email: enquiries@athollarmshotel.com. Website: athollarmshotel.com



Left: a piper with a difference greets visitors to the Atholl Arms Hotel. Above: Pan seared breast of Barbary duck.

All pictures: Kris Miller.

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