



Great Danes

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By Katherine MacAlister

KATHERINE MACALISTER crosses the border into Bucks – and enters culinary heaven.

Gary Smith is the best restaurant manager in the world. In my opinion anyway.

Pair him up with Adam Simmonds, a young, hungry, ex Manoir chef and Raymond Blanc protégée, and you've got a winning combination that left me feeling warm all over and in awe of their passion and skill.

So why were they so good? Well Gary knows his stuff through and through, and manages to impart his fabulous wealth of knowledge without being patronising. His enthusiasm for his job, means Adam's customers understand and enjoy the food without being made to feel inferior.

He made us feel like royalty when we arrived at the Oak Room restaurant at Danesfield House. And yes, I know Danesfield is just outside the county in Bucks, but hey, you've got to break out sometimes, and with Adam's reputation, it's worth crossing the borders just to see what all the fuss is about.

And within the first mouthful we'd got it. In fact as soon as we arrived at Danesfield and were ushered into the panelled bar, we knew this was going to be something really special.

Sipping champagne in our gladrags, waiting to be called to one of only eight tables in Adam's hallowed restaurant, was a wonderful way to build up our anticipation.

The rich furnishings of the Oak Room deadened the noise as we were led though to our places by Gary. We would be sampling the eight course taster menu and the hush in the dining room added to the wonderful air of expectation.

Adam didn't disappoint. An amuse bouche of gin and tonic deconstructed on a plate came with a gin and tonic jelly, an ice granite and a lime foam and tasted perfectly of the refreshing English aperitif. And with that first mouthful, Adam won us over entirely.

We were continually surprised by the dishes; cucumber essence with yoghurt pannacotta and samphire inspired us with its gentleness and subtlety, the soothing liquid cucumber pairing beautifully with the firm yet soft cubes of pannacotta and the faint crunch of the samphire. Pannacotta also featured later in the meal with the poached fillet of brill, but this time it was infused with wild garlic leaf, perfectly enhancing the soft flakes of fish.

But it wasn't just Adam's sorcery in the kitchen that made each dish so memorable, but the ingredients he used and allowed to speak for themselves.

The white nubs of asparagus with truffle and a slow-cooked hen's egg have stayed with me, as has the smoked haddock risotto with beetroot and horseradish veloute, the quality of the smoked fish and the perfectly cooked rice, sending me into raptures.

The slow cooked loin of lamb with aubergine caviar was sliced paper thin, the taste escaping as soon as you

placed it in your mouth.

We had the cheese before dessert, at Gary's suggestion, accompanied by a raisin wine that cast yet another spell over me, the liquid getting thicker and darker as the desserts proceeded. Some of the cheese had to be served on spoons it was so soft.

And then before dessert, a granny smith apple cider sorbet to cleanse the palate, the crisp, clean taste preparing us for the liquorice parfait with olive oil and pistachio, pineapple sorbet and liquorice dressing. Coached by Gary, our misgivings vanished as we realised the liquorice was a subtle background flavour rather than the overpoweringly harsh kick you'd find in a sweet shop.

We could have done without the banana and milk chocolate millefeuille, an imposter in such refined surroundings, like a chrysanthemum in a bowl of roses, but otherwise, the meal was flawless.

And the wine! Gary persuaded us to extend our predictable palates and I can't remember drinking such a wonderful stable of reds and whites before.

The tasting menu is £68.50 a head, which I think is extraordinarily good value for money. So keep an eye out for Adam. He's going places, you can taste it in every bite, his hunger matching those of his customers. As for Gary, if he could be bottled, he'd sell out in minutes. I just hope Danesfield knows how lucky they are to have these two young upstarts constantly pushing the boundaries and rendering the Danesfield dining experience impossible to beat.

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