

RESTAURANT TASTE

THE OLDE BELL

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“We don’t talk in food miles but food yards,” says Warren Geraghty, The Olde Bell’s executive chef. “In fact, we haven’t bought rocket leaves for five weeks and our potatoes are about to come through.”

This year, the 50-bedroom, beamed, tiled and bare-boarded Berkshire inn, parts of which date back nearly 900 years, is reaping the rewards of its vegetable garden. Extending over 100ft and incorporating eight vines of edible grapes, it’s tended by Mandy Hill, a gardener with royal estates pedigree. Geraghty, who admits such a practical matter as gardening is new to him, describes her as having “magical powers”.

Classically trained by celebrity chefs, Nico Ladenis and Marco Pierre White, Geraghty returned to Blighty in November after heading up Vancouver’s acclaimed West restaurant. The city was, he felt, gripped “by a major Olympic hangover”.

The Olde Bell, picturesquely located near Henley-on-Thames by a small church and village hall selling prints by local Rolf Harris, proved an ideal new project. “I’m the most impatient person in the world,” says Geraghty.

“We’ve already spent £100,000 on the main kitchens and £20,000 on an outdoor rotisserie which is much more interesting than just a barbecue. And I had an idea a couple of weeks ago to dig an 8ft fire pit for poor, unsuspecting Tamworths.”

Fortunately he’s got full support of general manager, Alan Dooley, who started four days before him. “The wine list is Alan’s baby,” says Geraghty of the compendium of 350 predominantly French and Italian bins.

Oddly considering Geraghty’s local sourcing ethos, there’s only one nod to English wine – West Sussex’s Nyetimber. “But the great thing,” he says, “is we pour well by-the-glass.”

With a cold starter of marinated octopus and similarly textured butter beans, Dooley serves balanced, modern, white peach-scented Domaine de la Cessane Marsanne/Viognier from the Languedoc-Roussillon. Believing in value (30 bottles cost less than £30), he explains it offers more accessibility than the more typical Albariño.

To follow, a chilled carafe of three-year-old Domaine De La Madone Fleurie holds up well against big-boned roast rack of very moist, new season Chiltern lamb with rustically chopped fresh violet artichoke – normally a nemesis of wine.

Finally, breadly, crumbly sticky toffee pudding with sour crème fraîche sorbet proves an ideal suitor with similarly sticky Hidalgo Pedro Ximénez sherry.

What does the future hold? As well as a desire to investigate Asia’s food cultures, Geraghty plans to plant fruit cages in the inn’s grounds and, fighting the tumult of environmental health bureaucracy, restore the inn’s original meat locker. A useful means perhaps to exploit regularly sighted visitors of munjacks, rabbits, pheasants and even half a dozen grouse.

Douglas Blyde



A modern outdoor rotisserie combines with traditional interiors at the Olde Bell in Hurley

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CHILE'S ACID TEST?

We have seen our Chilean sales soar over recent years, on the back of amazing value for money. The big headline from my visit is bulk cost increases of circa 80%, or even more.

Little winter rainfall, followed by a very cold spring, at flowering, affected fruit set. Summer heat was moderate. Bunch weight was down, contributing to a reduction of 20%-40%. There is far less bulk being offered, partly due to demand from growing markets as well as Chilean brokers and brand

owners buying up wine. Peso strength versus the US dollar, fuelled by minerals to China, is another factor. There is pressure on labour, with resources diverting to rebuilding after last year’s earthquake.

With volumes limited and prices high I was shown many “generic” wines masquerading as varieties. Anyone buying these lesser wines will be in for a rude shock when they fall apart after three to four months.

On the style front, alcohol is slightly lower than 2011, with less

aromatic intensity than usual for whites, while reds show good concentration and freshness.

The acid test for Chile will be how many price-driven customers stay with it, despite the price increases that will feed through this autumn.

Natalia Posadas-Dickson

Winemaker/
buyer for
WaverleyTBS

