

Pub Food Profile

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Nostalgic food and a phenomenal beer collection are fantastic ingredients for a great pub. A welcoming atmosphere and passion for what you do will add something too. Jessica Harvey reports



Ploughman's, Red Lion-style: Don't be afraid of having simple dishes on the menu

A roaring success

"MUSIC CAN bring nostalgia – even music you hated at the time can take you back 10 or 15 years – and food can have the same effect," says Daniel Ingram, head chef at the Red Lion in Cricklade.

The Wiltshire pub, a predominantly wet-led site just off the Thames Path and a finalist in *The Publican Awards* last year, is not just a food pub. But its menu is causing a stir with locals. Out front are nine real ales on tap and a world beer fridge with a selection that showcases nearly 50 different styles, but it's the kitchen and the staff's passion that has built the Red Lion's reputation. That, and its ultra-comforting retro nostalgia food menu.

"Food can trigger an emotional response and take you on a journey," says Daniel, explaining that when he first met up with the owner Tom Gee a couple of years ago, they realised they could create a rather special pub.

"The kitchen opened in mid-December 2008. It was Tom's vision to have all the pub classics, because when we first walked into the pub, before we even took it on, we got a really warm welcome. That has a lot to do with the locals. They really do

treat it as a home-from-home, so it was a really big thing for us to make sure that it maintained a very relaxed environment – an inviting one."

As if to exemplify this notion, Daniel points out ways in which they keep the atmosphere relaxed.

"There's a bit at the bottom of the menu that says if there's nothing here you like, you can always have something from the bar menu," he says, adding that he also makes fresh bread

The Red Lion displays its fresh bread for customers



every day. "I've got some nice loaves that I hang, so the bread is displayed. When you walk in, we can take a loaf of bread and carve it for you or give you a whole loaf to tear up yourself." It's the kind of thing that puts people instantly at ease, he adds.

Why the interest?

So where does all of this interest in homely, nostalgia food come from?

"I worked in Heston's pub for three

years, so that was all Lancashire hotpot, oxtail and kidney pudding, treacle tart, steak and chips – that's where I learnt to love this way of cooking," Daniel explains.

"There's a guy called Dominic Chapman, who got a Michelin star this year at the Royal Oak in Paley Street, Berkshire – Michael Parkinson's pub. He does baked Alaskas and stuff like that – he's probably been the biggest influence on my food."

"I've worked in a Michelin-starred restaurant before and done very complex 15-things-on-a-plate things, but these guys showed me that two or three really good quality ingredients speak for themselves."

As Daniel quickly explains, it hasn't always been the trend to create such dishes. Over the years Britain has lacked passion for its produce and cooking ability, unlike other countries, and this has been a missed opportunity. Now it's being brought back for the nation to shout about.

"For many years Britain had a terrible reputation for food. After the war, people became quite lazy with it. Just look at the Italians or the French – they are so proud of the traditional

dishes that they were brought up eating," says Daniel.

"It's a bit of a shame to go to a place in the UK and have a French influence. If you sit down and think about all the British dishes you know and get recipe books out, even the common ones that everyone knows – crumbles, treacle tart, sponge puddings – they're incredible."

Daniel believes we should take more pride in these simple dishes.

"Just chatting to the guys today about prawn cocktails, everyone's getting really excited about doing a prawn cocktail and the cheesier the better, you know," he says.

Nostalgic things are an instant hit, he continues, adding "everyone wants a Yorkshire pudding with their beef" and so sometimes it's based on expectations of a dish.

"People want to spend their money in a good place, but they want a safe option and not to feel they've spent money badly and left unfulfilled. If there's a place you like and you have an amazing meal the first time, it's hard to not have the same dish next time," says Daniel. "People are creatures of comfort, really."

Local relationships

The other thing the Red Lion focuses on is using local seasonal produce. "My boss bought in a jar of honey today, he was driving and saw a sign on the road saying there was a honey producer two minutes away, so we're going to start buying some of that," says Daniel.

It's really that simple, he adds – just a case of keeping your eyes and ears open – and seasonal produce can keep your menu interesting and fresh.

"Most of my suppliers only deliver once a week."

"Because I'm buying from a little farmer that rears the pork, takes it to slaughter, takes it to the butcher and brings it to me himself, it means the menu changes a lot. Chicken comes on a Tuesday, so we'll run chicken on the menu, sometimes it's



sold out by Friday. Pork arrives on Thursday or Friday and then we run the pork," explains Daniel.

"I like to think that, with working with local suppliers, what you get is a very fluid menu. For instance, someone turned up with some samphire last night, so my whole place on the menu tonight are going to be with samphire, which is great. It's dictated by seasonality as well, as I can only have what people bring in."

Daniel explains that it's this interest in local produce that has also built his relationship with his local community – now his regulars.

"We do tokens to encourage locals to bring us fruit and veg," says Daniel, describing how the voucher system has taken off. "More and more people have been coming in offering produce. We always mention people on the menu too, which they really like."

He points to the menu, at the bottom it reads: "Rhubarb from Mr & Mrs Devine, just two doors up from us." People like this, he says, because it marks their involvement in the food and shows appreciation for their efforts. The results of these efforts speak for themselves.

"We've had masses of support locally," says Daniel. "Being a pub, it's using what you've got and we've got great people around us." ■

Tactics for success from Daniel at the Red Lion

- **Don't try to make your menu too clever:** A lot of people try too hard. We put a corned beef hash on the menu, we'd had a really dead lunch and that was one of the first things that sold. People want things they recognise, simpler dishes. Even if you're capable of doing some crazy modern dishes, don't be scared of doing something simple, but just doing it very well. I like it if people think they've just had the best chips they've ever had.
- **Listen to your customers:** You have to listen to feedback. If more than one or two people say something it's for a reason. You can't cook for yourself, you cook for your customers. Without them, you've not got a business.
- **Plan for the future:** We've recently applied for planning permission to convert a barn out in the garden into a microbrewery, so that's something I'm really excited about. The space could also potentially serve as a place to teach bread-baking classes too. It's just to try and give something back to the community, really.



Suppliers

"Good suppliers don't find you, you find them," says Daniel. Below are a few Red Lion favourites:

- **Kelmscott Country Pork.** "We buy the raw gammon and roll the hams ourselves and bake them in the oven with honey and mustard. We do roast pork loins, bacon and whole smoked belly and we also use it to do huge chunks of smoked belly in a chicken dish or pork dish, just pan fried, as well as black pudding and sausages."
- **The Butts Farm Shop.** "They rear their own animals, including rare-breed beef, so we buy our steaks from them, like belted Galloway and all sorts of different ones."
- **Great Farm.** "They won the Great Taste Awards from the Guild of Fine Foods and Best Food Producer at the Cotswold Life Awards. Leonie rears the chickens and delivers them."
- **Coleshill Organics.** "Coleshill is a village owned by the National Trust, a little village with a walled garden and I tell them to just bring what they've got. So it's always in season. At the moment, they're bringing beetroot and baby sweetcorn still in the cob husk served as a bar dish."
- **Purton House Organics.** "Just a fantastic vegetable supplier in a village three miles away. They also use the vegetable vouchers that I'm doing, so they give me their vegetables and get these vouchers and often choose to give them to their best customers. A great company."



For inspiration, follow Daniel Ingram on Twitter @danlikes2cook