

Gourmets et gourmands

Andrew Kay joins the Chef's Table at restaurant **L'Eglise** for a gastronomic evening of excellence and excess



on the cover

Try getting the best chefs from the city and around to all sit down at the same table at the same time and you would find yourself with a logistical nightmare on your hands. After all, shouldn't they all be at that range cooking dinner for paying customers? It's not a task that I would undertake but I know a man who did.

Jean Christophe Martin is proprietor of L'Eglise in Hove with his wife Julia. Julia rules front of house, keeping their classic French bistro running smoothly. Jean, sometime chef, is very much at the helm when it comes to the food and although now busy running the business, he is never shy of donning his whites and getting involved with the cooking.

From the first time we met Jean and I realised that we had an obsessive passion for food (and for drink). We meet often, over a bite with a glass or two and inevitably our conversation will turn to food, swapping ideas, recommending places to eat or suppliers to use.

Earlier this year Jean called me; "I've an idea," he said. They're words I often hear him speak. Jean is an ideas person, some petite, some grande but most of his ideas are achievable – most, there have been a few that in the cold sober light of day we have both agreed were fantastic – but not in the right way.

This time the idea was 'plus grande'. I started to worry. "I am planning to 'old an event, a Chef's Table, with all the best local chefs sitting down to eat together and try the meat that I buy from a farm in the Wye Valley," Jean continued. Fantastic without doubt, but would he realise the dream?

Just a few months on he has done just that and in late April I sat down with around 20 guests from the world of food, mainly chefs, for an evening of culinary excellence. I had no doubt that it would be an evening of epic proportions, but this time Jean, Julia and their excellent kitchen team really pulled out all the stops.

The evening was centred around the produce from Huntsham Farm. Huntsham Farm is owned and run by Richard Vaughan and his wife, Rosamund. They specialise in producing fine rare breed meats from rare pedigree animals – Longhorn beef, Middle White pork and Ryeland lamb so there was going to be plenty of meat on the table. They already supply many of the country's top chefs, all of whom enthuse about the quality of their meat and Jean has been passionate about it for some time, even sending me pictures of suckling pig by text to whet my appetite. It worked, and I was more than ready to taste the real thing.

Over glasses of great pink Perrier Jouet Champagne we ate cubes of delicious foie gras, great bread sticks and the best crackling I have had in many years as well as some perfect crisp pork fat. I love crisp pork fat, when done well it should have the crystalline texture of good shortbread, but salty. This was super and perfectly balanced by their home made "Cervelle du Canut" (silk weavers brain), a herbed cream cheese.

Not the lightest of starts but an indicator of what was to come. So first out pâté de tête de cochon, or brawn as I know it. Totally delicious stuff served



with a mustard dressing and an apple and radish salad. It was met with almost universal delight.

Our next dish was an assiette d'agneau, shoulder, loin and breast cooked in three different ways, each highlighting the versatility of the meat but also of the kitchen. It was divine, meltingly tender and accompanied by a ratatouille of epic quality.

The main course was boeuf bourguignon, a classic that needs no messing. The centre piece was just that, perfect tender beef in a rich red wine sauce with lardon, baby onions and the exceptional oyster mushrooms from the Espresso Mushroom Company, a new business just outside Brighton. Okay, one tiny change, but well

worth it for these really tasty mushrooms. The chefs also gave us roasted bone marrow on a croute with shaved horseradish and parsley. This really was a meat fest of epic proportions and with each course the buzz about both the cooking and the produce grew stronger.

Meat finished with, we moved on to cheese. It was a difficult choice with a fine array of Sussex cheeses to one side and a massive selection from Ritter Courivaud to the other. I love my Sussex cheese but forgive me for delving into a plate of some fine stinky French stuff. Quite extraordinarily delicious.

We finished with a desert of mille feuille flavoured with elderflower liqueur, light and delicate, none of us thought we had space but most of us found a corner in which to tuck it. Throughout we drank delicious wines generously served by Francois Domange of Vinothentic, each a great match for the superb dishes on display.

I was lucky enough to be sat by Rosamund Vaughan who, whilst obviously being the 'Farmers Wife', is a business woman of incredible intelligence and depth. We chatted all night, sometimes about the farm and the meat but mainly about art and books and life. I could not have wished for a more entertaining neighbour.

At midnight I started to say goodnight. It took 30 minutes as I had to chat once again to some of my favourite local chefs; Jeremy, Ben, Sam, Henry Harris. They were all there and many more, and all equally impressed by the event, by Jean's ability to pull it off, by the quality of the produce and by the standard of the cooking which was universally thought to be exemplary.

Chef's Table was a great idea made real by a man of real passion and his team. So who will carry it forward? Over to you chefs of Brighton & Hove and beyond. For the rest of us mere mortals, food of the same quality using the same excellent produce is always available at L'Eglise and it is certainly worth looking out for their special events and offers. L'Eglise, 196 Church Road, Hove 01273 220868, www.legliserestaurant.co.uk. To find out more about Huntsham Court Farm go to www.huntsham.com. For the wines visit www.vinothentic.com and for the cheese go to www.rittercourivaud.co.uk.

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