



The king of roasts



**PAOLO
TULLIO**

**The Berkeley Room,
Berkeley Court Hotel,
Dublin 4.**

You'd think that after many years of reviewing restaurants there'd be no more surprises. Thankfully, there still are. Life would be dull and uninspiring if it were all predictable, so it's the surprises that keep the interest alive. This week is the story of how things can be very different from expectations.

Every now and then I like good old-fashioned comfort food; you know the sort of thing - roast beef, crunchy roasties, Yorkshire pud - classic Sunday lunch. There's nothing Frenchified or haute cuisine about roast beef, it's been cooked ever since man first thought of putting an auroch (the granddaddy of all cattle) on a bonfire, yet it can be badly cooked and it can be sublime. There's a restaurant in Dublin that has made roast beef a speciality and has done so for years - it's the Berkeley Room in the Berkeley Court Hotel.

I wanted to take my friends Michael Lennon and Alexis Mitchel out for lunch and I thought that a lunch of comfort food would be just the thing, so we arranged to meet in the Berkeley Court. Just to be clear here, what I was expecting from this lunch was what I've always had before in the Berkeley Room, a well made lunch of a style that was prevalent 30 years ago. Nothing wrong with that at all, it was what I wanted and what I grew up with.

So when we were all sat and brought the menus I got my first surprise. The first line of it read 'marinated cod with sweet and sour sardine, Mediterranean vegetable salad and citrus dressing.' Marinated cod? Sweet and sour sardines? This wasn't the cuisine of 30 years ago. I read on, my jaw dropping. 'Venison and shrimp chorizo sausages with smoked aubergine purée.' You can see a pattern emerging, someone has taken the once staid menu of the Berkeley Court and given it a thorough shaking up. However, they haven't thrown the baby out with the bathwater - the roast rib of beef is still in prime position on the main course listings. Alongside it you can find crispy duck with garlic mash, mange tout and orange sauce; a spinach risotto with mushrooms, a poached egg and Hollandaise sauce and a fillet of pork in a herb crust served on a sweet corn cake, cauliflower and broccoli tempura, diced purple potato and red wine jus. You see, even the old classics have been given a new twist.

Apart from the new menu, there's something else that I like about the

Berkeley Room. It has an air of ease and unrushed comfort. The tables are big – there's plenty of room for your impedimenta and everything else, the chairs are deeply upholstered and comfortable, the carpet is soft and the sound is so well absorbed by all this soft furnishing that you can't hear the conversation from even the closest table. If you want even more privacy, some of the tables at the side of the room are almost enclosed in booths, like snugs. After some of Dublin's brash, noisy, crowded restaurants, this is something of an oasis of calm. And there's another thing that pleases me about the place, the service achieves a level of professionalism that you'll rarely find in Dublin. The excellent waiters trained in the old school really make you realise how much better restaurant service used to be when waiters trained for the job.

Since we were all about to mix fish and meat dishes I ordered two half bottles of wine, one red and one white from the extensive list: a Koonunga Shiraz at €17 and a Macon Lugny at €14. Overall there was good value on the list, which carried a lower mark-up than usual for a hotel list. There's lots of good and expensive clarets, some good value St. Emillions, and some good value in the extensive New World listings.

We all chose different dishes: to start Alexis had the leek and potato soup, Michael had the marinated cod and I had the venison and shrimp sausage. Alexis' soup was the classic with no frills, just good soup. Michael's mari-

nated cod was like sushi and the sardines were both interesting and tasty. My sausage arrived prettily presented, little rounds of sausage arrayed around the plate which went delightfully with the smoked aubergine purée. A nice twist on 'surf and turf'.

Alexis and Michael had kindly left the choice of roast beef to me, Alexis choosing the crispy duck and Michael choosing the wild Atlantic salmon. The duck was exactly as described, the kind of crispy that almost melts in the mouth and the garlic mash was subtly done. Michael's salmon was a slashed darne, was perfectly cooked and came with very tasty asparagus noodles. And then there was the beef. A large silver-domed trolley was wheeled over to the table and our waiter unveiled a rib roast. 'Do you like it rare?' he asked. I nodded, salivating. He cut the joint in half and gave me three slices from the middle. 'There's more if you want,' he said and wished us 'bon appetit'.

If I tell you I was in heaven with this perfectly cooked beef, it's hardly an exaggeration. Later I allowed myself to be persuaded to another slice and Alexis got one as well. After this there was no thought of dessert, just coffees all round and petits fours. A three-course lunch here costs €33 and a two-course lunch like ours is €26. With the wines, mineral waters and 15percent service charge, the bill came to €137.09. **W**

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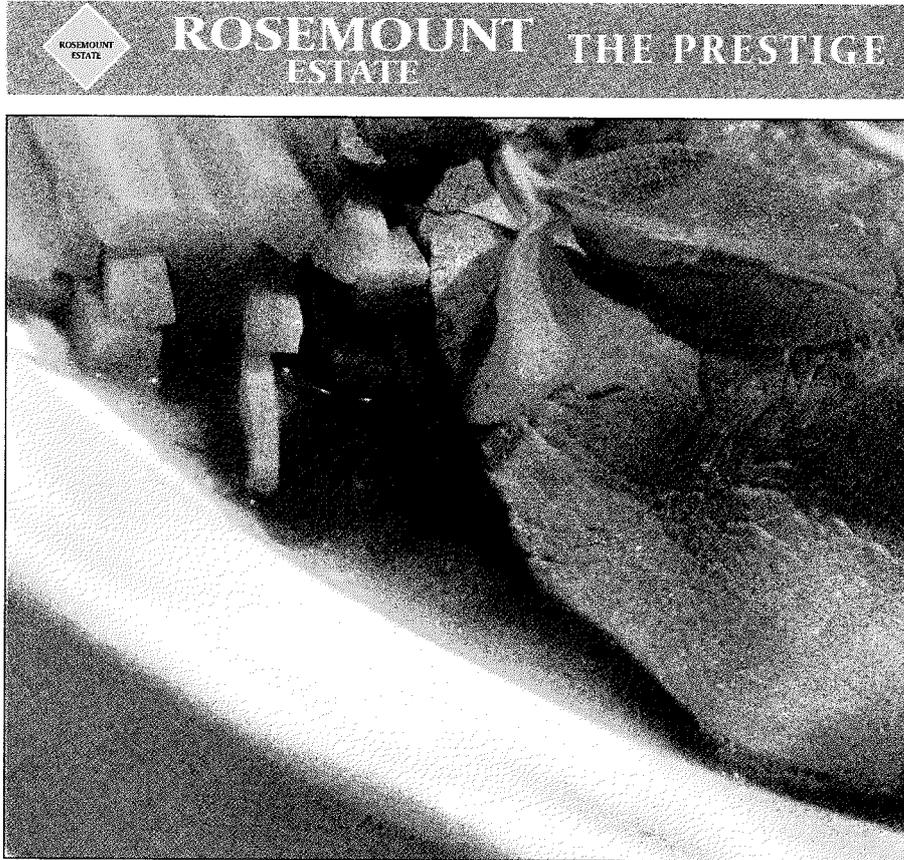
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