

restaurant review

BY AMANDA BLOOMER

GARA ROCK East Portlemouth, Salcombe

SURELY THE GLORIOUS PANORAMA FROM GARA ROCK MUST HEAD ANY LIST OF ICONIC SEASCAPES?

With that as our table view, we were thoroughly spoilt by the Gara Rock team who bubble over with enthusiasm; clearly enjoy what they do; are eager to please; proud of their standards; friendly, knowledgeable ... our principal server Fabi(enne), delightful.

So, too, the Thienot Champagne we sipped whilst choosing. From a contemporary champagne house founded near Reims in 1985, this was crisp as a spring morning; a beautifully balanced, complex fizz with a finish to savour long after the final bubbles burst. Rarely do house champagnes available by the glass offer such finesse.

The menu is sufficiently varied to be interesting, not overwhelming, with an excellent selection of dishes catering for dietary restrictions; it draws from both our spectacular local larders of land and sea – an exception, the dry-aged, grass-fed Scotch beef from the Buccleuch Estate specifically chosen for its intense flavour and tenderness.

Su ordered, with delight, one of her favourite dishes as a starter – stuffed garlic and herb shellfish gratin - declaring the decadently rich platter of Queen scallop, mussels and clams oozing pungent garlic butter 'as good, if not better, as any I have ever had in France'



(and she has had a lot!).

My carpaccio of Devonshire cured beef bresaola was reassuringly dark, almost purple. Caperberries adding a pretty, piquant twist to its classic

Our visit was a masterclass in the new normal – and we can't wait to return.

dressing of rocket, parmesan and basil, it was as lean and tender as it should be.

Regular readers may recall Su's partner rears his own pigs, hence her very rarely choosing pork when

dining out but Pugh's Farm piglet 'suckling pig' proved irresistible. A stonking slice of rolled belly slow roasted overnight so all the fat runs out, encased within perfectly crunchy crackling, arrived with a Devon Blue stuffed roasted fig ('I cannot tell you how wonderful this fig is'), confit carrot, caramelised onion and silky-smooth sage soubise.

The final morsel of that delectable meat defeated her on a plate otherwise devoured and savoured, to the very last drop of the delicate sauce.

I was there later when she admitted to her partner that the 'pig' was every bit as succulent, flavoursome, moist and tender as

any from their own porkers. Brave, but true.

I opted for the simplicity of Spaghetti alle Vongole, a dish evoking lazy-hazy summer days in Italy. An abundance of the sweet, juicy bivalve molluscs nestled amidst the hugely generous serving of al dente pasta liberally dressed as expected with lemon, parsley and chilli. Elegant in presentation, this robust dish delivered wholly disproportionate pleasure given a principal ingredient spending much of their lives buried halfway in sand.

Su and I chose glasses of Le Chapeau Qui Rit house wine – pink for Su, white for me – which were both easy drinking, light, fresh and aromatic from a carefully curated list offering value and variety including some exceptional wines representing both traditional techniques and modern methods of viniculture.

Desserts followed a very necessary rest.



My choice, my favourite Treacle Tart with Clotted Cream, but would it be as I like it? Not too gooey, not too sweet, definitely not cloying and 'cut' with lemon. Yes! It was absolutely perfect from the toasty surface adding texture to the thin and crispy pastry case and topping of just the right depth. It would be worth a trip to Gara Rock for that alone.

Su's selection, Chocolate Pudding

topped with Peanut Butter mousse and maple candied bacon. Knowing her love for peanut butter, there was no contest, the addition of the bacon, an intriguing touch of quirkiness. Head Chef Stefan Smith is definitely on a winner with that pud! Well balanced layers of texture and taste and no, the bacon was not a gimmick – it offered a punch of tangy crunchiness against the lightly whipped mousse.

The welcome at Gara Rock is as warm and friendly as ever but now, reassuringly safe too, with careful attention to detail and yet, you barely notice the necessary restrictions so seamlessly have they adapted their operation. For anyone wondering whether dining out can be just as enjoyable as before the world went mad, the answer has to be a resounding Yes if you choose Gara Rock.

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