

THE SUSSEX OX

A romantic al fresco setting - and not a chicken nugget in sight



The last time I sat down for a meal in the Sussex Ox, in Milton Street just outside Alfriston, the two people I was with were suddenly called away between ordering and eating and I was left in the confusing position of having to deal with three plates of food on my own.

This time, at 6.20pm on a gloriously sunny spring evening, the only problem is time. My girlfriend and I have an hour to order and eat, because we have to get back to Lewes by 7.45. We rush through the doorway of this rather beautiful, whitewashed, red-tile roofed establishment, and explain the situation. “No worries,” says the pleasant, uniformed bargirl, and points us to a large blackboard amply filled with options. I go for the calf’s liver (£10.95), my girlfriend Suzie chooses the ‘herb-crusted rack of lamb’ (£14.25).

The barmaid sees my camera. “Have you brought that for the sunset?” she asks. “I just take it everywhere I go,” I reply, neglecting to tell her that we’re doing a review, and I’m aiming to snap the food that is served up before me. We do these pieces incognito, or they wouldn’t mean anything. There’s no such thing as a free plate of calf’s liver with bacon, bubble and squeak, onion gravy and vegetables, as far as we’re concerned, though it *is* tax deductible.

People tell me that the Sussex Ox used to be brilliant for kids, but when it was taken over a few years ago the new owners got rid of the playground, and put in a deck full of tables, so a different sort of clientele could enjoy a more upmarket type of

food in peace and quiet. You can get kids’ portions, but the nearest thing to chicken nuggets is ‘breast of chicken stuffed with pesto and mozzarella with a tomato sauce,’ which would seem a little wasted on a seven year old. It’s more a place for adults to relax in beautiful surroundings - there’s an unspoilt view of the sun-drenched fields leading across to Firls Beacon and the ridge of downsland behind it. Birds are tweeting. It’s pretty idyllic, truth be told. Romantic, even.

The food arrives within ten minutes, which gives us time to enjoy it. We do our usual thing of swapping stuff, so I end up with three bits of different locally sourced animal on my plate. In this case, it proves to be a mistake, because – as is my wont – I’ve gone for powerful tastes, and – as is hers – Suzie’s gone for more delicate flavours. The calf’s liver is so powerfully succulent, and the thick-cut bacon so tangy, that I can’t really savour the subtlety of the lamb. The highlight, though, is the bubble and squeak, which has a crunchy semi-charred layer at the bottom, just like the soccarat of a well-cooked paella. I rant about how boring British boiled vegetables are, and we sup our drinks (I go for a pint of Dr Hexter’s Healer, a fine bitter from Berkshire, Suzie opts for a French Merlot) and we realise what a pity it is that we’re not going to have time to enjoy what is looks like it’s going to be a spectacular sunset. But importantly, given my history with the place, I leave with the person I’ve arrived with. And we plan to return, what’s more, with more time on our hands, in the summer. *Alex Leith*