

There is something wonderfully comforting about an English pub when the weather turns nasty. A refuge for the hiker who has just trudged down from the fells to the welcome glow of the hostelry with its real ale and heatwarming fare.

And in fact that was pretty close to the way I felt when I made a 50-yard dash from the car into the welcoming interior of The Boot, as the rain hammered down, soaking me through in seconds.

But I cheered up instantly as we were shown to a table next to the log fire with a good view of the bar. First impressions last, and this was a very good first impression which was to carry throughout the meal.

I had not visited The Boot before, but was left wondering why I had not done so, particularly as it is only 15 minutes' drive along the A40 from Oxford.

Having made ourselves comfortable, we were presented with menus and wine list which offered a good choice at reasonable prices, which is not always the case at so-called gastropubs these days.

The Boot was taken on by Adelaide-born chef Craig Foster in November 2003, and it doesn't take long to see the Aussie stamp with peppered fillet of kangaroo one of the choices heartily recommended by the (South African) waiter/barman.

But on this occasion I was not feeling particularly brave and my attention was drawn to the specials board above the fire.

Top of the list was grilled sardines as a starter — not an automatic choice for me by any stretch of the imagination, but I thought I would attempt to overcome my usual fear of fins and try it for a change.

And I am glad I did. The sardines were hot, fresh and tasty and the chilli and coriander marinade offset the strong flavour perfectly, while the small salad on the side was the perfect accompaniment.

My companion opted for the soup of the day which was coriander and red onion. This was described as "very tasty," although the bread served with it was a little hard and had obviously been left out too long.

Despite this small blemish, this had been an encouraging start and even my choice of a French white vin de pays to accompany it proved a good one, with the wine sharp enough to cut through the sardines without being harsh.

On to the next course and we had a choice of light bites such as kedgeree and seafood linguini, or the larger courses which we opted for.

Having had a relatively healthy starter, I decided to make up for lost calories and chose the roasted pork belly which came with baby vegetables, apple, black pudding and new potatoes.

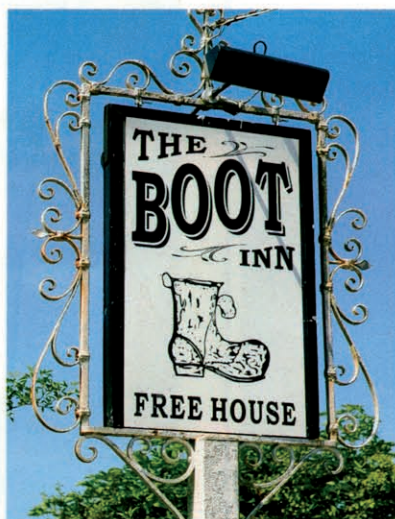
This was a very large piece of pork with a lovely crispy crackling on the outside. A warming meal fitting for such inclement weather, and I only just managed to clear my plate, which was perhaps a mistake as my stomach admittedly struggled to digest such a fatty, albeit delicious, slab of meat.

Across the table, the lemon and thyme roasted chicken breast was going down just as well with the herbs giving the meat a beautiful flavour, while the accompanying crunchy citrus



First impressions have it laced up

Andrew Smith finds shelter, good food and a warm welcome at The Boot, Barnard Gate



and fennel salad was refreshing on the palate.

It was much lighter than my main course with the result being that I had to wave the white flag on dessert, delicious as dark chocolate mousse and strawberry baked cheesecake sounded.

But there were no such qualms for my companion who selected the summer fruit pudding, opting for ice cream instead of cream. This was a perfect example of the spongy sweet with plenty of fruit crammed inside. It was much appreciated.

Not only is The Boot good on the food front, it is also a traditional pub serving local beers including Brakspear and Hook Norton. And then there is the collection of footwear from sports stars and celebrities exhibited around the walls which is well worth a mini-tour of the premises.

Names range from Stirling Moss to the Bee Gees to Ian Botham and most come with a letter and picture from the owner.

Ultimately, a visit to the Boot is a real occasion and one that we shall repeat in the near future.

THE BILL

Menu: Coriander and red onion soup, £4.50; sardines, £5.50; lemon and thyme roasted chicken breast, £12.95; pork belly, £11.95; summer fruit pudding: £5.50.

Drinks: Two glasses of white wine, £8; cappuccino: £2.75.

TOTAL: £51.15

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