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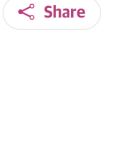
Jay Rayner on restaurants
Food

Review

The Martlet, Rochdale: 'A victory of professionalism' – restaurant review



Jay Rayner

Sun 24 Nov 2024 06.00 GMT

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'Great taste and skill': The Martlet, Rochdale Town Hall. Photograph: Shaw & Shaw/The Observer

Civic pride meets glorious cooking at a remarkably fair price

The Martlet, Rochdale Town Hall, OL16 1AZ. Lunch plates £10; main courses £14 – £21; desserts £5; afternoon tea £21. Evening menu: three courses £35. Wines from £22 a bottle

It's easy to imagine the ways by which the Martlet in Rochdale could have gone so very wrong; how the perceived demands of civic responsibility and the innate grinding conservatism of bureaucracy could have resulted in a dull, mediocre offering for the town. It wouldn't even have been worth rolling your eyes at. It would have been understandable. The Martlet is a new restaurant inside Rochdale's magnificent Town Hall. Since 2021, the building has undergone an equally magnificent restoration, to bring this slab of Victorian gothic revival by William Henry Crossland, into a golden, glowing focus. There is finely chiselled stonework, stained-glass windows and wood-panelled chambers with intricate foliage-strewn wall coverings recalling the work of William Morris. Ceiling panels are decorated with branch and leaf, upon which perch fully plumed peacocks and illustrations of the martlet, a mythical bird that was forever on the wing. Whatever you do, make time to drift slack-jawed through these chambers. Perhaps while wearing a pale, lace-fringed linen smock dress and kohl eyeliner. I could rock that look.



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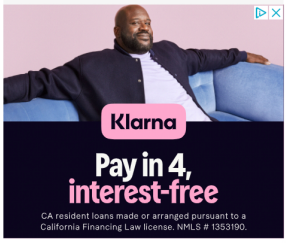

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'Wedges of sweet-sour apple': pork chop. Photograph: Shaw & Shaw/The Observer

Such a new civic amenity needed some sort of food and drink outlet. They could have installed a modish and frankly annoying pan-European small plates bistro that nobody wanted. Or it could have been a bog-standard coffee and cake job. The Martlet does have the latter covered. There is good coffee and cake available here. But it is so much more. It's a broad offering drawing on the heritage of Greater Manchester in a smart, witty and generous way, and all at the sort of prices that will make those used to shaking down their bank accounts for a bit of lunch, sigh deeply. Head chef Darren Parkinson grew up locally and trained at Hopwood Hall College just four minutes' walk away, before a career which took him to France, Winteringham Fields in Lincolnshire and the Shibden Mill Inn near Halifax. Now he's back home with a menu that touches many bases. You can come early for a full English, or a Bombay breakfast of fried eggs, mango chutney, onion bhajis and flatbreads. At lunchtime there's a list of platters for £10, a couple of which have the echo of that imagined small plates bistro. There's a soft herb risotto with truffled nuts and pecorino, or a salad of pickled beetroot, radishes and goat's cheese dressed with white balsamic. Substitute tofu to make it vegan.



'A class piece of work': Scotch egg. Photograph: Shaw & Shaw/The Observer

It all sounds lovely, but I'm here for the boulder of breadcrumb-crusted Scotch egg, made with Bury black pudding, with the heft of white pepper. Cut in and the yolk runs away. Underneath is a thick bed of their own piccalilli, which has crunch and softness, sweetness and acidity. It's a class piece of work. Or get the sausage roll, which arrives sliced into five finger-ready pieces. The puff pastry is as inflated as a peacock's tail feathers, and each piece is topped by a properly spicy curry sauce ketchup. Swipe away at any that's left over with the very good chips. To one side of the menu is a panel entitled Rochdale Town Hall Classics, all for £14. Alongside fish and chips, which come with Manchester caviar (mushy peas, of course), there's a bacon chop with more of the Bury black pudding and, joy of joys, a rag pudding.



'Joy of joys': rag pudding. Photograph: Shaw & Shaw/The Observer

If you've not encountered one before, it's a parcel-shaped pie, named because of the way the suet pastry is hand-folded over the filling to make it look like a bundle of the cotton rags which once underpinned the region's industrial economy. It encloses a thick, gooey filling of both braised and minced beef. The flaky pastry has the crack you get only with animal fats and it sits in a knee-depth reservoir of gravy so glossy you could check your hair and make up in the reflection. With it are crisp-edged hasselback potatoes and minted garden peas, with more depth and maturity than their petit brethren. (A quick aside: the first time I met the great Manchester chef Rob Owen Brown, I asked him why he listed his grilled Barnsley chop as coming with little peas. "Because you're in Manchester," he said, tartly. "They're not petit pois. They're little peas.")

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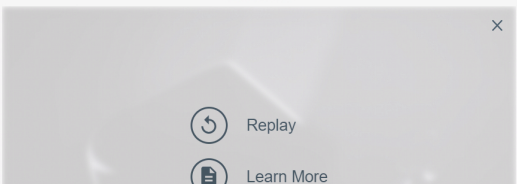


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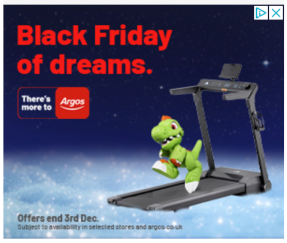

From the grills section comes a Gloucester Old Spot pork chop for £17, which more than matches the rag pudding for value. It is the thickness of a copy of Jilly Cooper's *Rivals* and just as satisfying. There is a seared ribbon of fat at its back, guaranteed to sustain you through a Rochdale winter, and it comes with cherry tomatoes, roasted on the vine until they are just about to burst lasciviously from their skins. There are wedges of sweet-sour apple which maintain their structural integrity and a goblet of thick-cut chips. There are roasted carrots and portobello mushrooms and another of the meaty sauces the kitchen has nailed. Note: if you attempt to treat the Scotch egg as a starter, before either of these mains, you may find portion size challenging. In these parts that's quite as it should be.



'Popping with sultanas': scone. Photograph: Shaw & Shaw/The Observer

It is an early midweek lunchtime and the vaulting room, in shades of rhubarb and custard with huge drapes at the cathedral-high windows, is doing a brisk trade. Apparently, it's even busier on a Friday and Saturday evening, when Parkinson does a more formal menu, offering mackerel and crab from Whitby to start, followed by a beef wellington and then sticky toffee pudding with a miso caramel. It's a mighty £35 for three courses, or £30 for two. To finish today there's lemon drizzle cake or a Victoria sponge, baked on site, alongside a white chocolate parfait or a slab of Garstang blue with an eccles cake, among other things. But they are here to feed at all hours, so they also do an afternoon tea at £21 a head, and we have been admiring the glazed and risen scones parading occasionally across the room.

So we nibble on one of those that comes with both butter and a scoop of clotted cream, alongside the jam. Don't ask which order any of this should be applied because, whisper it, I really don't care. It's a great scone, slightly misshapen and popping with sultanas. But then it's all been great, so by this point we expect nothing less. The Martlet is a victory of professionalism, good sense and, most of all, great taste and skill. It's a recognition that a thoughtful, well-conceived restaurant can be as much of a civic amenity for its community as anything else for which the council is responsible. Every town should have one.

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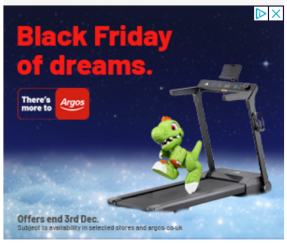

News bites

Roy Brett, chef-proprietor of Edinburgh seafood restaurant Ondine Oyster and Grill, has announced it is relocating from the upper-floor space in the city's Old Town, which it has occupied since 2009. In an Instagram post he explained that the scaffolding across the front of the building, which has already been in place for a few years, will go on for a while longer and he's had enough. The last service will be on 31 December. A new location is yet to be announced. Meanwhile, Brett is preparing to open a second Ondine inside the new Seaton House hotel in St Andrews, which opens next February (ondinerestaurant.co.uk).

Much loved Thai restaurant Singburi in Leytonstone, northeast London, has closed its doors after announcing it was "going on sabbatical" to give the staff "time to ruminate". Lengthy closures are not unusual at Singburi. They just tend to cover the start of each year. Last year they closed just before Christmas and didn't reopen until late March. The small, family run restaurant, which started as a fish and chip shop, is currently listed at number 71 in the National Restaurant Awards top 100. Follow them on Instagram @singburi_e11

And a follow-up to last week's story about the closure, in Lyme Regis, of Mark Hix's Oyster & Fish House. The site is being taken over by Mitch Tonks' Rockfish group and will reopen in the new year. "Although I will be sad to see the Oyster & Fish House close next month," Hix has said. "I do feel the time is right and I cannot think of a better fit than Rockfish to take its place" (therockfish.co.uk).

Join Jay Rayner and Grace Dent on Monday 16 December as they discuss his new cookbook Nights Out At Home, live at Kings Place and livestreamed globally. Book tickets here or at guardian.live

Email Jay at jay.rayner@observer.co.uk or follow him on Iinstagram @jayrayner1

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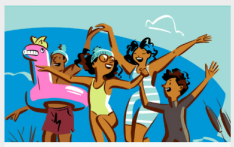

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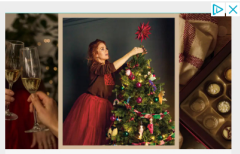

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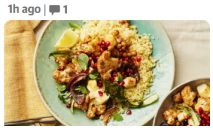

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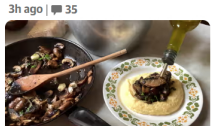

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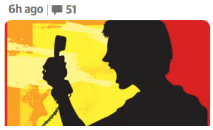

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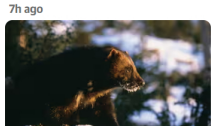

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Guardian Pick

As a poncey southerner, I'm not properly qualified to declare what makes a rag pudding authentic, but I would go so far as to say that the only time I've been served rag pudding, it was fundamentally different to that. The main difference being that the suet pastry was boiled in a muslin cloth, more like suet pudding. I was told that dish is named from the cloth (rag) it is boiled in.

The one I was served was delicious and I have

Guardian Pick

I generally prefer it when Jay is putting the boot into some pretentious venue, but this one was a joy. He clearly enjoyed his visit and it showed. A brilliant review, I want to go there.

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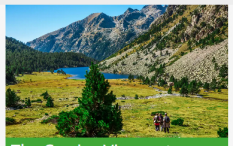
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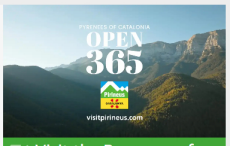

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