

THE POT KILN – AUTUMN NEWSLETTER

What more can we say?

FINANCIAL TIMES MAGAZINE Tim Hayward tim.hayward@ft.com 06 Oct 17



Photo by Shannon Robinson December 2016

Back towards the beginning of the century, a chef called Michael Robinson created something of a TV hit. He was, to be fair, the chef patron of the Michelin-starred Harwood Arms in Fulham — but he also took part in a fly-on-the-wall documentary about finding and restoring a country pub.

These were the early days of food TV, long before shouting, artificial story arcs and false jeopardy. Robinson and his wife located the place — a cosy little red-brick boozier in Berkshire — and made it lovely, apparently without threatening each other or walking out in tears. The Pot Kiln has carried on ever since, a quiet retreat and a bit of a “destination” for appreciators of game.

You’re not going to chance on Frilsham by accident. On the map, it’s tantalisingly close to the motorway, but, according to the satnav, you’ll need to head right to the end of The Beaten Track and then turn off. After

seemingly endless lanes of decreasing width, you’re disgorged into a hidden valley that looks for all the world like the set of an over-sentimental BBC historical drama.

Through a bar with locals and dogs straight from central casting, you are led to a table by beautiful boys with cut-glass accents. Colin Firth in a wet shirt is not having a quiet dinner with a young Helena Bonham Carter at the next table, but American guests might find it impossible to believe that they don’t, at least once a week. The menu is short and enticing.

Robinson is a master of game cookery and this is almost certainly the reason you’ll make the trip. There are starters of “heritage” tomatoes and beetroot-cured Gravavlax but these look merely excellent. Let’s cut to la chasse: there’s a pigeon-breast salad on the menu that’s going to change your mind about game.

I know. We've all been trying really hard over the past few years, but let's be honest. Game might be low-fat, de facto organic and arguably sustainable...but it's also too often bloody dire. Pigeon breasts are frequently tough, shot-riddled, bruised and have usually been over-hung like the Gardens of Babylon. Without fat, venison either lacks flavour or has been allowed to putresce. Grouse might well have been rushed to your table from the moors in a Maserati...but it's not enhanced by the trip. If we're honest, game eating is too often about class, or stunt food for the macho.

And then there's The Pot Kiln. If I told you there was a place where chefs were "foraging local ingredients, preparing them skillfully and then serving them in the way that most honoured their natural flavour and terroir but that also nodded to local culinary tradition" – you'd nod sagely and guess the 2 Michelin Starred Fäviken or Noma. But this isn't Scandinavia. Robinson is doing that – all of that – five miles off the Chieveley junction of the M4.

Robinson's pigeon breast is cooked pink, naturally, and served on a mound of dressed leaves, small wild mushrooms, bacon and crumbled black pudding. There are smears of something dark, rich and caramelised but it's the meat that carries it. Sweet, fragrant, crisp on the outside and velvet smooth within, it's so tender it's halfway to being a parfait. The stringy

lumps of scabby bird you've had before should have stayed on their owners in Trafalgar Square. This, my friend, is what the fuss is about.

Grilled Pavé of fallow comes with an intense jus, dark oily leaves of kale and a mash that seems to have been fortified with the outstanding quantity of fats that venison lacks. The meat – seasoned, grilled and sliced – just invites you to compare your every other dalliance with deer to it, unfavourably. Unadorned but just beautifully cared for, it is simple and very, very lovely.

There are other things on the menu – good fish, excellent desserts and well-kept cheeses – but you can find these in any decent country pub. It's the game that's worth hunting down but, be warned, it may ruin you – after this, it will be hard to appreciate game elsewhere.

If you like your deer hung till it challenges nose and palate, if you like your birds torched without, raw within, tendoned like a cyclist's calves and with a handful of herbs to mask the stench of death...then there are plenty of places that will serve you. Here, in unpretentious surroundings, expect to see a small selection of superb game, treated with skill and honour.

