

Restaurant review: Cruising along at Ratho

by Nigel Duncan

☒ It was a bitter night. The thermometer had plunged to minus 7C. It had been snowing and the roads were treacherous. Not the best start to an evening and the lure of a dinner by the fire was strong. However, we made the trip to the canal cruise from The Bridge Inn at Ratho and came away warmed by the experience.

It is over 30 years since Pam and I had been on a similar cruise from The Bridge Inn situated in a village on the west side of Edinburgh. That cruise was on Midsummer Night and was also memorable as we were stuck in the mud several times and we arrived home at 2.30am.

On this occasion, the skipper also had problems. He had to back-up and turn on the power to break the ice but it was, once again, something we'll not forget. The attentive staff made everybody welcome aboard the 36-capacity craft and the Pride of Belhaven chugged its way up the Union Canal. The floodlight on top of the boat lit up the banks and it was somewhat surreal as the ice cracked and the barge slowly made its way up the canal whose banks were covered in thick snow.

Thankfully, it was cosy inside the spacious cabin and the diners who called off because of the inclement weather were the ones who missed out. I had eaten the day before at 125mph on the East Coast main line train returning to Edinburgh from London. This was totally different.

The leisurely pace of the barge, in contrast, allows one to chill out and the smell of the food from the galley increased the experience. Starters were considered as an accordionist played in the background, a nice touch for this Saturday night

cruise on the eve of St Andrew's Day.

Cock a leekie soup, partan bree topped with seared scallops or mini beef and haggis olives with red onion marmalade were the options.

Pam went traditional and the soup proved a winner. Piping hot and full of flavour. Spot on for a cold night. My beef and haggis olives were most enjoyable. The seasoning in the haggis was just right and the cold red onion marmalade added to the dish.

We then had four options for main course. Braised Borders lamb shank stuck out for me as a nap selection. I have savoured this dish at home and abroad and I was keen to see how this would match up.

Pam had more of a selection quandary. The homemade vegetarian haggis and char grilled aubergine parcel, wild mushrooms and tarragon sauce looked mouth-watering. However, it eventually came down to a straight choice between skirlie stuffed chicken supreme with haggis tattie dauphinoise, whisky and Arran mustard cream or trio of Scottish salmon with orange zest and caper crème fraiche.

Pam loathes whisky and was veering towards the salmon but, eventually, chicken won and her fears over the sauce were misplaced. It was mild and added to the overall taste of the dish. My lamb was wonderful. The meat fell off the bone and the red wine and herb sauce was perfect, bringing out the sweetness in the lamb but not overpowering the dish.

We both loathe soggy vegetable and on-board chef Lee Skelton must be complemented in producing broccoli, carrots and green beans which had just the right amount of crunch. Thankfully, the staff gave us time to digest the first two courses before asking for our pudding selection. Wild berry cranachan with shortbread was a possible or trio of Scottish cheeses but we both decided that warm spiced rhubarb strudel with ice cream

was ideal for a cold night.

The sharp rhubarb taste was complimented by cinnamon, a brilliant mixture, however the double whammy on the taste buds did tend to negate the flavour of the vanilla ice cream and the pastry was a tad disappointing. Coffee and mints followed. I always feel it is bad policy for a restaurant to just offer one cup. It seems so stingy and we were not disappointed here. A second was offered and it was accepted gratefully as we were about to disembark into the freezing weather.

The cruise took around three hours and I would have no hesitation in recommending it, not just for the experienced but for the food. It cannot be easy cooking in a restricted space and without all the equipment you would have on land.

Take a bow Lee.

Rachel and Graham Bucknall took over at The Bridge Inn earlier in 2010. They have lived in the village for several years and are desperate to see the well-known venue climb up the culinary charts.

Long-term plans include turning the clock back with the decor – not before time – to make The Bridge Inn once again a country local.

They also, when possible, use produce from their garden including apples from the orchard for their apple pie and pork from their Saddleback pigs.

Plans are already laid to extend the garden and grow more produce. More power to their elbow. They are working hard to re-launch the venue and their energy is to be commended. So is a night cruising, even in sub-zero temperatures.

Canal cruising

From The Bridge Inn

27 Baird Road

Ratho

EH28 8RA

0131 333 1320

<http://www.bridgeinn.com>

Open seven days