

food & drink



with Paul Stammers and Katherine MacAlister



THE THATCH, LOWER HIGH STREET, THAME 01844 214340

'I know, no one likes a know-all, but Peach Pubs has found a winning formula'



Just peachy

KATHERINE MACALISTER settles in for a comfortable evening

I THINK we'll wake up soon to discover that Peach Pubs has taken over the world, but in the meantime they are content to run 10 gastro pubs and open another dozen over the next five years.

Three of these are in Oxfordshire – The Fishes in Hinksey, which has just won an *Observer* award, The Fleece in Witney and now the Thatch in Thame. Yes, the Thatch does crop up in the news more often than Ashley Cole but that's because it entered the TV celebrity arena in Raymond Blanc's

The Restaurant series and hasn't slunk out since.

Winners Jeremy and Jane took over and did a great job for six months until she had a baby and scampered back to Devon. Luckily, Peach Pubs saw the Thatch's potential, and added it to their bulging portfolio.

And it's great. I know, no one likes a know-all, but Peach Pubs has found a winning formula. With award-winning chefs, managers and food coming out of their ears, at the moment they are riding the crest of a wave while everyone else is merely dipping their toes in the water.

So what's the secret? A great team both-in the kitchen and front-of-house, a relaxed atmosphere with winning service with a smile, and great comfort food with a contemporary twist. Plus Peach tends to go for market town locations crying out for a decent eaterie – a captive audience of sorts.

In fact, the only fly in our ointment was the dubious live singer crooning Oasis and Alanis Morissette numbers in the corner. "She's not exactly Joan Baez" my mother drawled, before ordering the potted crab with toasted sourdough bread and the pan-fried salmon with mediterranean vegetables.

I had the haddock smoky, mixed leaf salad and granary bread starter followed by the crispy halloumi, roast apricot, celery and walnut salad with lemon mayo dressing.

Considering the Thatch had done 160 covers at lunchtime (it was Mother's Day) and the restaurant was full for dinner, you would expect them to be lagging, but the cheery staff and excellent food proved that the tempo continues whatever the occasion.

But back to the food; the crab was packed full of meat and the fishpie bubbling with crispy goodness. The salmon was moist and succulent and went perfectly with the mediterranean veg and new potatoes.

As for the salad, I'm not sure halloumi and roast apricots are the best combination, both veering towards a gentle rubbery texture. Something sharper was needed to perk it up a bit, but it was gentle comfort food, done well.

I don't know how we managed the hot chocolate sponge cake, hazelnut parfait and chocolate sauce as well, but we did, probably because it was so wickedly gooey, which we washed down with coffee.

And with the singer still walling gently as we left, we reflected that, Joan Baez or no Joan Baez, the Thatch will no doubt stay in the headlines if it continues serving such smashing food at this level. A great evening out.

THE BILL

Potted crab with toasted sourdough bread	£6.75
Haddock smoky, mixed leaf salad and granary bread starter	£6.25
Pan-fried salmon with mediterranean vegetables	£12.50
Crispy halloumi, roast apricot, celery and walnut salad with lemon mayo dressing	£11.50
Hot chocolate sponge cake, hazelnut parfait and chocolate sauce	£5
Coffee	£2

Being picky



ALL BAR ONE, HIGH ST, OXFORD 01865 791696

FRUIT flies are plain daft. They've got 13,601 genes, but all they seem capable of doing is swooping, kamikaze-like, into your drink.

Hence (it's said) the tradition of tapas emerging in southern Spain.

Folk would plonk a slice of bread or ham over their glass of sweet sherry to keep the blighters from taking a dunk in the oloroso, although I wonder why anyone would be happy to let *Drosophila Melanogaster* alight on a tasty silver of serrano ham.

Anyway, tapas have moved on a long way since then, evolving from bar snacks into a full-blown platter of multi-cultural mini-meals. This is evident at All Bar One, which offers 'World Tapas'.

No files were buzzing around to give the place an authentic touch when my friend and I visited on a Monday lunchtime, but I noticed, to my surprise – given ABO's reputation as a place for leggy young females – the nearest customers to us were all blokes who would never see 50 again.

ABO has offered tapas for yonks, but has tweaked the selection lately for the benefit of customers too lazy to pick a selection in detail. The menu now features three 'bundles' of tapas, the first of which 'seemed appetising enough for my friend and I' to order as we sipped draught Aspall Suffolk cider – a welcome alternative to Strongbow or Magner's.

Bundle one, costing £21.50, was listed as meatballs, lamb koftas, chorizo, tiger prawns, ciabatta and hummus, though the grub arrived with pitta bread, salsa, and a salad garnish too. The juicy meatballs in a tangy tomato sauce stole the show, although the chargrilled prawns in lemon and garlic vied with the rich chunks of chorizo for second place.

We were glad of the tzatziki dip with the koftas, as they were too dry, but the hummus, pitta and ciabatta bread hit the spot.

While the selection was enough for two hungry diners, we did opt for what limited puds were available – fondant cake and mini waffles (£3.90 each). Both desserts were rather sweet, and came with heart attack-sized dollops of clotted cream.

● All Bar One is offering two tapas (choose from chorizo, chicken quesadilla, calamari, hummus, organic goat's cheese bruschetta) plus a bottle of Pinot Grigio or Malbec, for a tenner until April 17. See allbarone.co.uk/offer/tapasandwinefortenpounds/

PAUL STAMMERS

oxfordfood@nqo.com