

Flavours to savour

Michael Halbert's launch menu is a celebration of spring and marks his record-breaking rise through the kitchen ranks to head chef at The Fleece in Witney, writes **Denise Barkley**

Ask Michael Halbert what his food is all about and he comes down on the side of classic simplicity. "As long as you have the best produce, there is no need to over-complicate things" said the Birmingham-born 26 year-old who is now at the helm of one of Oxfordshire's favourite pubs, The Fleece on Witney's picturesque Church Green.

"I don't need to add extras like fiddly micro-herbs, the flavours speak for themselves."

Michael has had a meteoric rise with Peach Pubs, the Oxfordshire-based company which now has a stable of 17 pubs. He rose from commis chef at sister pub The Fishes in North Hinksey, Oxford, to head chef at The Fleece in four years – a record for Peach – and in doing so has achieved his boyhood ambition.

"I knew ever since I first set foot in a professional kitchen that one day I wanted to run my own," said Michael. "I always loved cooking and even at school I was playing around with recipes and putting my own spin on them, much to the dismay of my cookery teacher who just wanted to get me through my GCSE. What came next really changed the way I looked at food; I moved to Oxfordshire and spent two years at Fallowfields hotel in Southmoor, where we home-produced meat from pigs reared on our own farm and pulled fresh vegetables out of the ground. It taught me to respect the good ingredients we as chefs are lucky enough to work with as well as a lot about where food actually comes from."

Southmoor was also where Michael met his wife Karen, and they now have two children – Alexander, aged four, and Jessica, two.

With experience in fine dining under his belt, Michael decided to try the busy environment of a pub kitchen turning out good fresh food every day, and he loved it.

Corin Earland, Peach's chef director, commented: "What makes Michael stand out is that he is calm and dedicated to his job. He

is also a quick learner and once he has been shown something, he can repeat the same thing again, with great results every time."

Michael is equally complimentary about Peach, who he describes as "a brilliant company, relaxed and open-minded to new ideas."

Michael (pictured below) has launched his first menu, for spring, at The Fleece. "It is really something to have my own kitchen, to put my own food on the menu and see people enjoy what I have cooked," he added.

I had a preview of the spring menu on a chilly evening in early March, when his delicious food with a light touch reminded me that warmer days are ahead.

Starters included the lighter delights of chicken and spring onion terrine, baked free-range eggs with tomato, feta and basil crumb or pan-seared pigeon breast with smoked bacon, chicory and hazelnut salad.

My husband Steve chose the Brixham Crab Benedict, served on a bed of spinach and topped with a poached egg and Hollandaise sauce – it looked pretty sizeable to me but, as eggs Benedict is one of his favourite things ever, it was consumed with gusto.

I had the superfood salad of tenderstem broccoli, broad beans, quinoa and baby

spinach with a tangy oriental dressing – it was absolutely delicious. It whetted my appetite for my main course without filling me up too much, which is sometimes a problem with starters.

The mains included chicken breast with potato and carrot rosti, morel and tarragon sauce; goats cheese and hazelnut tart with green bean salad, and a grilled cannon of Cornish lamb with Moroccan-spiced couscous – but, as ever, Steve's head was turned by the steaks. They come from award-winning butcher Aubrey Allen and are 28-day dry-aged, so they promised much and didn't disappoint. Steve's 8oz rump was cooked medium as requested, pink and tender, and served with chips, salad and garlic butter. He could have added three king prawns to this for an extra £4.50 to create a 'surf and turf' but this was a step too far after his filling starter.

After my superfood salad, I remained in light and summery mode with the pan-fried sea trout. This was just cooked so it remained nicely moist and it came with a polenta and sun-dried tomato cake and a caper and almond beurre noisette. It was really delicious.

If you have read my reviews, you will know I am not generally a big fan of puddings. But I found a lot to like with Michael's desserts. Steve managed to summon enough tummy space for Valrhona chocolate cake with peanut butter truffle and banana ice cream, while I had lemon and lime posset with a ginger biscuit on the side. The citrus tang of this creamy pud finished my meal off perfectly.

The Fleece is an attractive pub which is open from 8am each day and always buzzing. It was being revamped at the end of April so should be even nicer still. In the warmer weather the tables outside overlooking Church Green are the perfect place to sip something chilled and watch the world go by. It gets busy though, so always book if you plan to eat. **LE**

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