



FARE DIFFERENCE: The Continental has repositioned itself away from the standard pub with some traditional dishes given a new twist

As long as I remember, The Continental has been much the same. A basic, no-frills pub, serving Stella and bland pub grub to its regulars and the venue of choice for post-Easter Monday eggrolling, mostly due to the huge climbing frame in the large beer garden which keeps sugar-charged kids busy.

But, after a period of closure, it all change down at the Conti. In fact, it's not so much a change as a full-on revolution.

My friend Nicky and I popped in for late Sunday lunch after hearing endless good things since their recent reopening and the difference is immediately obvious.

Gone is the tired chintz, replaced by stylish flock wallpaper, blocks of statement colour, polished wood and well chosen accessories, creating a subtle calming interior. The conservatory and beer garden have also had a makeover to exploit the views across the nearby Ribble and the play area has given way to funky garden furniture and sail-like canopies providing shelter from either sun or rain.

But what really repositions this pub away from workaday boozier and into another league is the fare on offer. New landlords Ruth Heritage and Jeremy Rowlands have enlisted some strong support, with Stephen Kerfoot, from Catforths Running Pump, as head chef while their cellar is in the expert hands of former Marble Brewery manager Warren Mac-Coubrey.

I'm reliably informed that the selection of cask ales on offer is second to none and the wine list also looked extensive and inviting.

But it was the food we had come for. The Continental kitchens aim to produce quality restaurant standard interpretations of Northern classics created with fresh ingredients sourced from local suppliers and utilising local specialities.

They succeed brilliantly. My starter of baked herb crust savoury cheese-cake made with local Lancashire cheese, served with a compote of

# Northern soul

A thoughtful makeover and some reinvented regional classics on the menu ... JUDITH DORNAN visits The Continental, Preston



SUBTLY CALMING: Blocks of statement colour and a conservatory view across the Ribble



sweet red onions (£4.50) which cut perfectly through the creaminess, was delicious and Nicky remarked on the piquancy of the flavours in her smoked salmon, olive and lemon dressed salad (£5).

Her main course, from the specials list, of pan-fried breast of guinea fowl on garlic mushrooms and fine beans with red wine sauce (£10) was received with similar enthusiasm. I stole a mouthful and can report that the meat was succulent, flavoured and gamy.

Nicky, having a wheat allergy, is most restaurants' idea of a nightmare customer. But nothing seemed too much trouble and her extensive questions about ingredients and requests for modifications to dishes were all smilingly accommodated. My main of pork chop with Bury black pudding on a bed of butter mash (£9) was the only slight disappointment. Although the potato was fluffy and the meat beautifully

cooked, the overall flavours did not seem to fly like everything else although it would have been more than adequate in many other places. The presentation was excellent and our eyes were continually drawn to colourful and appetising plates of food making their way past us to other tables.

In the interests of research, I sneaked a mouthful from the plate of a friend dining nearby on another item from the specials menu, a homecooked steak, field mushroom and thyme pie (£7.50) and immediately wished I'd chosen this. The pastry was crisp and flaky while the meat was meltingly tender and the gravy rich, herby and hearty – a gourmet take on a traditional pub favourite.

And so to the puddings – a very far cry from the tired mass-produced chocolate fudge cakes and sticky toffee pudding afterthoughts served elsewhere.

Everything on the plate was homemade, from the delicate buttery longue du chat biscuit basket which held the accompanying ice cream to the filigree spun sugar decorating the desserts. Sole exception was the ice cream itself which was farm-house-made.

I opted for a velvety vanilla and strawberry panacotta (£4.50), which came topped with a layer of fresh wild strawberries smothered in a luscious fruit coulis, and savoured every mouthful.

Another mouthful of a friend's pudding revealed an exquisite apricot glazed bread and butter pudding (£4.50), with a rich custardy texture, accompanied by delicious swirls of raspberry coulis and creme patissiere.

This is what the New Continental does best – taking a classic and elevating it with a delicate touch. From nowhere, Preston has suddenly gained an exceptional pub.

## lightbites

### Ale and hearty

There are more breweries in Britain than at any time since the Second World War, according to the 2009 edition of the CAMRA Good Beer Guide.

“Over 70 new breweries have been founded between the 2008 and 2009 editions,” says editor Roger Protz. “That follows 80 new breweries in 2006 and a further 80 in 2007. Britain now has more than 550 craft breweries and many of them are enjoying spectacular growth. “The reason is simple: more and more drinkers are looking for taste and character in beer rather than the tasteless fizz offered by global brewers.”

### Saucy Jack

Jack Daniel's, the oldest distillery in America, has launched a new range of sauces – Original, Hot Chilli, Full Flavour Smokey and Rich Honey, which come in 275g bottles and are around £2.29 at major supermarkets.

### Bag to basics

Pringles have finally broken out of the can.

The new Pringles Select chips – smaller and rounder than the traditional crispy snack – actually come in a 150g bag, at around £1.48. Choose from Italian cheese with a hint of garlic, Thai Sweet Chilli, Sea salt & balsamic vinegar, Spicy szechuan barbecue, or Sundried tomato with basil or paprika.

### Chefs on show

The North West Food Lovers Festival provides the perfect excuse to visit Tatton Park in Cheshire over the weekend of October 25-26.

The new-look festival is the start of a week long programme of events in and around Knutsford.

Cookery demos by top regional chefs Simon Rimmer, Andrew Nutter, Paul Askew, Leigh Myers, Brian Mellor and Paul Taylor will be part of the programme and all the key North West producers are expected. “The region offers some of the best produce and most experienced chefs in the country,” said a spokesman. “People are in for a treat.”

Also on the menu will be competitions with the chance to win free meals at top restaurants.