



DATES WITH BATES

by Rosie Inge

**I love the idea of a pop up restaurant. You are guaranteed a freshness and re-
invigoration of energy and input. It doesn't
happen day in day out, so the routines which
can become boring don't exist.**

Terri Chichester had wanted her own tea shop since the age of seven. She had been the excellent and popular general manager of The Swan Hotel in Wells for many years and left to run a B&B in 2013 in the pretty village of Croscombe only five miles away. She has taken on a rather dingy pub, The Bulldog, and made a real home from home, with low ceilings, wonky walls, comfy sofas and plain wooden tables and chairs – and re-named it The Cross at Croscombe. She had great difficulty in raising the money but eventually Lloyds Bank supported her – they are apparently pro-women and pro-hospitality. The hostelry is good enough to have won Mendip Business Awards 'Tourism and Hospitality Business of the Year' in 2016 for the second time. The rooms are spacious and inviting and her guests come from far and wide, including an elegant couple from Petersfield celebrating their 58th wedding anniversary and one couple who goes every week without fail.

Award-winning Ian Bates left the Metropolis, where he worked under the capable and respected Simon Hopkinson at Bibendum, for a quieter refuge and opened his restaurant The Old Spot in England's smallest City in 2006. If you are creative by nature, in whatever form, sooner or later the admin becomes wearisome and detracts from what you do best. Running a restaurant involves so much more than just the marrying of ingredients to form a dish

far greater than the sum of its parts, and it was the nitty gritty that persuaded Bates to use his considerable skills in a different way.

It's perfect. In Dinner Dates with Ian Bates, Terri brings in new people – and villagers – to her B&B every Thursday, many of whom stay the night so that they can enjoy the full flavours of the evening. And the chef is able to concentrate all his creative skills using the best ingredients that Wells market has to offer, with a fresh enthusiasm. He comes out to sit with supremely satisfied customers after they've enjoyed his dedication, not only to take a bow but also to discuss the menu and his thinking behind each of the dishes. He is influenced totally by the seasons and how enticing the different offerings look on the market stalls. He says that 'all food is good if made with care, paying attention to small details, even how you put things in the fridge. I'm probably a bit obsessive compulsive but I know from my training and my instinct what goes well together'.

Terri has a small selection of white and red wine to choose from, or else, following advice from David Schroetter of Sante Wines in Wells, she will offer you a different wine with each course – an exceptionally sensible accompaniment to the simply sublime food.

Ian chooses the main ingredient of each of three courses at the beginning of the month, depending on what will be at optimum quality at that time of year. You book the meal wherein the choices most appeal. Not even Terri knows what the dishes will be until she takes them from the kitchen to serve to the guests; her problem is remembering the details! So, we had leeks, beef and coffee to dream about in the days leading up to our date.

He pulled out all the stops. With the glass of Prosecco included in the price for dinner, we had the crispest light fried bread bearing a perfectly smoked mackerel with sweet mayo. The lightest of young leek soup with chive cream and a toasted Gruyere finger was followed by a rich, sweet, dark piece of beef cheek braised to ultimate tenderness with mushrooms persillade and crispy onions on top of silky mashed potato and celeriac. Nothing pretentious here; it was visually impressive Real Food which looked good, tasted good and did me good; the residue on my lips said that the stock had been cooked for hours with a great selection of bones and vegetables. As I pressed my fork on the Tiramisu, the coffee wept elegantly and it could have been served in a shot glass and I would have welcomed it; it tasted of the smell of coffee rather like an oyster tastes of the smell of the sea. It was a perfect blend of coffee, chocolate and amaretto; Mrs Cain, another guest, said it was the best Tiramisu she had ever tasted. The wines were cannily perfect for each course – 100% Viognier from La Clape Languedoc with the soup, classic Bordeaux blend of Merlot and Cabernet from Chateau des Antonins with the beef and the most beautiful Muscat Petit Grains to accompany the pudding.

Generosity is important to both protagonists – of care, creativity and comfort. Terri and Ian have put together an irresistible combination for total enjoyment. So irresistible, that we returned a fortnight later to celebrate my birthday – see the picture of the 'Almond' pudding that we were served then.

www.cross-croscombe.co.uk/dinner-dates-with-ian-bates Tel: 01749 343352

