

MENU QUICK PEEK

BREAKING THE BANK

Starter: Dublin Bay prawns in a lemon, garlic and coriander butter sauce with grilled croutons, €12.50

Main course: 28-day aged 14oz Porterhouse steak with seasonal vegetables, potatoes and choice of sauce, €38

Dessert: orange and pecan nut pudding with orange syrup, crème anglaise, cinnamon and vanilla ice cream, €7.50

Wine: Châteauneuf-du-Pape, reserve des Armoiries, €88
Dinner for two: €204

WATCHING THE PENNIES

Starter: French onion soup with toasted cheese sourdough crouton, €7.95

Main course: roast free range chicken supreme with pistachio and bacon farce, cherry vine tomato and redcurrant jus, €22.95

Dessert: caramelised apple cream tart with blackberry gel, green apple purée and raspberry sorbet, €7.50

Wine: Bouchard Aîné Chardonnay, €26
Dinner for two: €102.80

TOMÁS CLANCY RATES THE WINE LIST

The list here runs to 49 wines, and is thoughtfully and enjoyably assembled. It has 20 whites, two rosés, a dessert wine, 21 reds and five sparkling wines, including an excellently priced Frizzante Prosecco at €35 a bottle, or €8.50 a glass. The Bouchard Aîné, Chardonnay and on the red side, a Torrelongares Tempranillo are both €26 a bottle, or €6.90 a glass. There are ten wines by the glass from €6.90 to €8.50 for the prosecco. Should you want to splash out, however, fine wines are near at hand including classed growths such as Château du Tertre, AC Margaux at €105 and, of course, Champagne Dom Pérignon at €280. Our white pick is the piquant The Wine-Farer Chenin Viognier, Stellenbosch at €41. Our red pick would be the mildly spicy Winery Arts Squared Three, Ribera del Duero at €42.

Rating: ★★



Fire & Salt, Johnstown Estate, Enfield, Co Meath: serving up dishes that look great, taste great and show more than a little flair

GARETH BYRNE

An Enfield eatery that's worth its Salt

food

Gillian Nelis



Fire & Salt

Johnstown Estate, Enfield, Co Meath
046-9540000,
thejohnstownestate.com
Chef: Val O'Kelly

As Christmas approaches, and we begin to ponder what we'd like to be different next year, can I put my oar in now for a more sensible approach to food?

It would be quite nice to think that 2018 would be the year when we left fad diets behind, stopped taking dietary advice from emaciated-looking people on Instagram, and started throwing chefs who insist on apeing René Redzepi off the nearest cliff.

Not that I'm getting my hopes up for the latter, after reading an article on Eater.com about what an ex-Noma chef (has anyone not worked there?) is planning for his new restaurant in Mexico. The chef in question, José Luis Hinostroza, will focus on "pre-colonial Meso-american cuisine, techniques and ingredients".

This will be served up in a dining room with no tables or chairs (so passé). Instead guests will sit on rocks and eat off logs in an effort to evoke "personal experiences that we've had in small indigenous communities", according to Hinostroza. He'll be charging those who want to pretend they're a Mexican jungle dweller for a night \$80 a pop. Someone send him a copy of the lyrics to Pulp's Common People, fast.

By all accounts, René Redzepi is a lovely man, but he really does have a lot to answer for. Not least the fact that so many chefs – and there are more than a few of them in Ireland – are so fixated on serving up dishes that are nothing more than Noma pastiches that they've forgotten that food should, you know, taste good.

By all means experiment with ingredients, techniques and presentation, but please don't do it at the expense of flavour. This Nordic/Scandi obsession won't last forever, and once all the attention has moved elsewhere, you'll need more than some manky-looking pieces of fermented fruit to keep bums on seats in your dining room.

Keeping bums on seats is, I suspect, not going to be a problem for Val O'Kelly and his kitchen team at Fire & Salt, the restaurant at the revamped Johnstown Estate in Enfield in Co Meath.

Like many hotels around the country, it has got new owners and an investment injection over the past couple of years, with the ground floor common areas now

shining like a new pin and a redecoration programme being rolled out across the bedrooms.

Fire & Salt has been one of the main beneficiaries of the spend to date, with its mix of booth and table seating, muted grey and wood decor, and general cosy feel. As you may have guessed from the name, it specialises in cooking meat over fire, or specifically over a charcoal grill, allowing O'Kelly and his team to serve up meat 'black and blue' – charred on the outside, rare in the middle – or 'black and pink', which is how most Irish people would probably like it.

We adopted the 'when in Rome' approach and decided to skip starters in order to go straight to the meat: specifically the 20oz Chateaubriand served with tobacco onions, potatoes, seasonal vegetables and sauces (€72, feeds two), and requested it medium rare.

A piece of beef this size takes a while to cook, but we had a cheesy crème brûlée amuse bouche, as well as a raspberry sorbet with lime sugar, to occupy us while we waited. Both were lovely – the lime sugar in particular elevated what was already a well-made sorbet to something very tasty indeed – and indicated an attention to detail in the kitchen that is pretty rare in hotel restaurants.

And so to the main event, and all the theatre it entailed: a set of carving utensils deposited on the table closely followed by a little jug each of pepper, béarnaise and mushroom sauce, and generous



We'd eaten early, but by the time we were leaving the place was hopping, not just with hotel guests, as one staff member told me, but with locals too

bowls of baby potatoes and veg.

The meat itself, carved at the table, was gorgeous – full of flavour, meltingly tender, and mostly cooked as requested. I say mostly because the thinner bits at the ends were, as you'd expect, a good bit the far side of medium rare. But we couldn't complain, as the taste more than made up for it.

Of the sauces, the green peppercorn with brandy was my favourite, although the mushroom one, made with whiskey and pancetta, ran it a close second. "Too much vinegar and not enough tarragon," was the verdict on the béarnaise from the other side of the table.

The only other slightly bum note was the creamed spinach, which tasted great but was a little watery. The roast potatoes, which had been lightly sprinkled with cumin, were lovely though.

Stuffed as we were, we thought we'd share a dessert, a frozen hazelnut parfait with a little layer of hazelnut sponge, some chocolate sauce and a crème anglaise (€7.50). I liked the little I managed of it; it was indulgent, but not overly sweet.

The price of all this, including a bottle of Bordeaux for €45, was €124.50. Considering just how stuffed we were (the dessert really was surplus to requirements), and the wine we'd gone for (bottles start at €26), this is pretty good value.

We'd eaten early, but by the time we were leaving the place was hopping, not just with hotel guests, as one staff member told me, but with locals too. "They've always come to eat in the bar, but they're starting to really like the restaurant now too," she said.

And who can blame them? Even operating within the confines of a hotel kitchen, where he has to be sure not to startle the horses, O'Kelly is serving up dishes that look great, taste great and show more than a little flair. There's a lesson there for more than a few of our image-obsessed chefs, I reckon. ■