



Source: The Journal (Newcastle) (Main)
Edition:
Country: UK
Date: Saturday 14, February 2015
Page: 45
Area: 674 sq. cm
Circulation: ABC 16884 Daily
Ad data: page rate £4,570.00, scc rate £14.80
Phone: 0191 232 7500
Keyword: Peace & Loaf



Quality fare really knocked me for six

IT'S all change for Newcastle's fine dining scene.

Recently I reported that Kenny Atkinson's House of Tides has abandoned his tasting-only-menu policy and introduced a Market Menu option for lunch and dinner.

Now I can reveal that two Newcastle restaurants are adding tasting menus to their offerings. In March Artisan introduces a seven-course "nose to tail" menu for just £37.50 per person while, later this month, former Masterchef runner-up Dave Coulson adds a tasting menu for his loyal and enthusiastic clientele at Jesmond's **Peace & Loaf**.

So loyal are Coulson's customers, that their votes gave it my Journal Readers' Award in 2014. It deserves to be successful. When I first visited, shortly after its opening in November 2013, I gave it five stars, complimenting its modern, complex cooking, ambition and charm. Not resting on laurels, Dave Coulson tweeted that he wasn't ungrateful, but he hoped that in due course he'd earn a sixth.

Now I only award six stars to cooking I consider of the highest standard, like James Close at The Raby Hunt in Darlington or Tommy Banks at The Black Swan at Oldstead, North Yorkshire, and, more recently, Kenny Atkinson's House of Tides. I believe it's equivalent to a Michelin star, whether or not the Michelin Guide inspectors agree with me.

That's why, when Coulson told my office about his new tasting menu, I was keen to be the first to judge. I'm coming clean here: I didn't pay for this meal (though I made a pretty hefty contribution to the *tronc*). This

was a £70 banquet. I'm sure my few niggles will be fixed by the time it's available to the public from February 24.

Little snacks came out first - Coulson has served these sort of delights from the outset - a confited carrot of intense sweetness on carrot purée with some sharper onion jelly; a little fish ball rested on crispy kale, sprinkled with desiccated anchovy; crunchy chicken skin with smooth chicken liver parfait. They still serve quirky bread here: last time it was tomato ketchup-flavoured; this time it was black pudding arriving with a large dollop of brown sauce butter.

Coulson and his team, which includes the talented Cevat Robert Elat, formerly of Jesmond Dene House and Cafe Royal, had been out

foraging. Among the "NE2 shoots" that came with light goat's curd on crispy, thin, peppery sourdough, I spotted common chickweed and, a first for this season, the tiniest sprigs of wild garlic. This formed a deliciously fresh starter.

Next came a roll of dashi-braised beef with a smear of smoky black garlic, celeriac pureed and roasted, and wild mushroom. It was a balanced, interesting dish, but probably

a little early in a tasting menu, for it rather overpowered what followed: meat fruit.

This is a Heston classic from medieval times, which takes an age to make and is a bit of a party piece: it looks like a chocolate-covered apricot, served with a slice of grilled sourdough. Where Blumenthal uses chicken liver and foie gras parfait, with mandarin jelly as the fruit's

peel, Coulson creates a kind of oriental version, with duck and a hoisin plum jelly, and sage for the fruit's leaves. I would have preferred the plum a touch fruitier to cut the richness of the duck, so I used a glass of Chilean Pinot Noir instead. It worked.

Fish came next: flawless wild sea bass, with seared onion and cauliflower, pickled, pureed, thinly sliced and deliciously charred. This was an imaginative mix of bitter and velvety flavours, nicely paired with New Zealand Albariño.

My next course almost worked: hake, squid and pig cheek placed together, with pomme puree and a rich, dark jus. My only misgiving was contrast: hake and pig cheek are a little similar in texture and tone, so perhaps a more robust monkfish might have worked better.

My grande bouffe then got even more outrageous, with top and tail of lamb - tongue and rump - with Jerusalem artichoke, tiny mushrooms, and a good dark jus and Australian Shiraz to match.

After a pre-dessert of an Oreo biscuit with a cheesecake-flavoured middle (they should copyright this idea), the finale brought a clever combination of pear, frangipane and crumbs of sharp, creamy Stilton.

£70 a head may place this meal in the special-occasions category (as an alternative there's the *à la carte*, or the good-value early evening or lunch *prix fixe* at £20/£30), but as a three-hour food fest with exceptional cooking and unbeatable service under *maitre d'* Liewy, it's hard to beat in Newcastle. I thoroughly recommend it.



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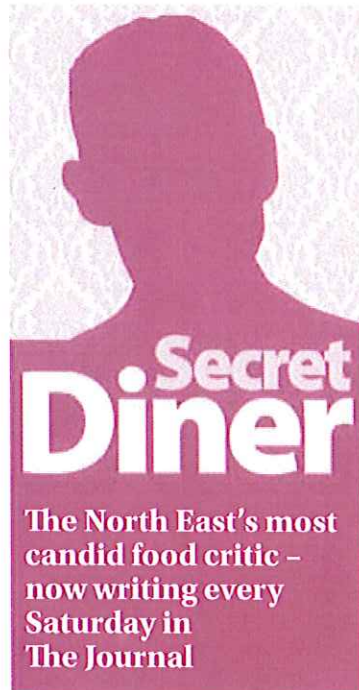
**Secret Diner's verdict
(out of 5 stars)**

Food ★★★★★
Service ★★★★★
Ambience ★★★★★

Peace & Loaf

217 Jesmond Road
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE2 1LA
0191 281 5222
www.peaceandloaf.co.uk

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➤ **Peace & Loaf** is the restaurant of Masterchef: The Professionals runner-up Dave Coulson. It is a relaxed fine dining experience with ambitious, complex and clever cooking, including meat fruit, below