

Hello and goodbye

CHRISTOPHER GRAY

welcomes a new menu at the Ashmolean and says goodbye to an 'old friend'

Though I once signed up for Twitter, I have yet to tweet. Daft delay, perhaps, since this increasingly important networking site is not just there for organising riots. As one example, many of my fellow guests at a smashing event last week at the Ashmolean Dining Room had been summoned thither by a message posted to followers. These lucky souls had a fabulous evening of marvellous food at the end of which — hallelujah — there was no bill.

The occasion was a chance to try the new autumn menu, which is being introduced today (three weeks early, some would say, though others might agree with me that the season appeared to begin on August 1 this year, certainly on my blackberry bushes). The general manager, Andrew Cashin, had assured me that the tasting would last only 90 minutes or so from 6pm, meaning I could cross to the Playhouse for reviewing duties, having been able to try most of the food on offer. In the event, such was the rich assortment emerging from chef Jimmy Worrall's kitchen, that guests were still scoffing at 9pm, with Rosemarie and me long gone.

No matter: in the hour we were there we sampled a rich variety of food that confirmed this rooftop restaurant to be one of the best places to eat in Oxford — especially in fine weather when you can sit out on the terrace, gazing over buildings to open fields in the west. Though operators Benugo opened it less than two years ago, as an ornament to the reborn museum, it is already a valued city institution.

When I return to eat — as I shall very soon — there can be no doubt it will be to sample once

again what seemed to me to be Jimmy's star starter. This was the grilled squid, served — tentacles apart — in sheets with rocket salad (you can see it pictured over on the right). Marinated in lemon and garlic and coated with smoked paprika, it was as tender as any squid I have eaten (India rubbers all too often being brought to mind by this much maltreated mollusc).

If this squid is unavailable, then the platter of seafood will do just as well, consisting of a chunk of cured herring, Royal Greenland prawns (indistinguishable, I thought, from less highfalutin' varieties), Clare Island smoked salmon and caperberries. Hang on — I could actually have *both* these dishes, in either order, since they are available as starters or main courses.

Other starters that met with our great approval included cauliflower and truffle oil soup, Trealy Farm air-dried ham with celeriac remoulade, Serrano ham and figs, Cornish crab pannacotta, and a salad of toasted cauliflower, pine nuts and raisins with caper dressing. Before heading for my appointment with *The Rise and Fall of Little Voice*, there was just time for a couple of main courses: chargrilled bream with glazed lemon chicory and chive crème fraîche, and what I took at first to be a risotto but was in fact sautéed pearl barley with wild mushrooms, leeks and spinach. Monkfish tail, lamb rump, lemon sole, and rabbit leg — all these must wait for another day; along with chocolate and amaretti sponge, baked apple pie and a fine trio of cheeses (Isle of Mull cheddar, Manchego, and Cothill blue).

My full main course actually came post-theatre when I attended a street party to mark the closure of the Big Bang restaurant in Jericho to make way for a new development. Chicken piri-piri sausages it was, courtesy of owner Max Mason. This publicity-savvy fellow has perhaps had his picture in *The Oxford Times* even more often than I, so the opportunity of having us snapped together by our picture editor Jessica Mann was not to be missed.

Max plans to reopen elsewhere in the city very soon. Watch this space.



■ **STREET PARTY:** Farewell to the Big Bang. Right, the taster evening at the Ashmolean

Pictures: Jessica Mann, Alison Chantler and Helen Peacocke