



Gnocchi, served on a creamy herby pea sauce, a hazelnut pesto and garnished with pea shoots and the 'cheese with no name'



A roaring success:
The Lion at Malpas

ART ON A PLATE

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Krystian Jurek

Group head chef
THE LION AT MALPAS

Val and John Allen share a legendary tarte tatin and an array of other culinary delights from a menu that's a roaring success

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Do you dream of the quintessential country pub? One where you can find a comfortable inglenook to enjoy a glass of decent wine or a pint of excellent local ale; a reasonably priced but tasty nibble and a good magazine to while away a couple of hours? Where a group of convivial locals can stand at the bar without being pressured into eating. Where you can meet friends and family for food that meets the expectations of the youngest and the oldest and everyone in between... or where just the two of you can have a delicious meal....

Look no further.

The Lion at Malpas reopened after lockdown having undergone a refurbishment that included a fabulous charcoal oven-grill and beautiful soft furnishings and decorations worthy of the gracious old building with its bars and restaurant, a suite for business or celebrations and a charming outside seating area with a wood-burning stove. It's a place to linger, thanks to the ambience, and the delicious menu. And for those tempted to stay longer, the Lion has a variety of beautiful bedrooms.

Woody Barlow and his general manager Bethan Rose-Bailey run an excellent team. Woody, the founder of Bear Inns, oversees both the Lion at Malpas and the Swan at Tarporley for owners Si and Chrissy Lees-Jones. He also supplies both establishments with the most outstanding sourdoughs and focaccias from his artisan bakery, the Bradwall Bakehouse.

The Lion's chef, Krystian Jurek, is an irrepressible and imaginative force of nature for whom food is an endless delight to be tweaked, deconstructed and then reconstructed, without compromising on provenance, flavour and balance.

If you're just popping in for a bite, I highly recommend the lamb shoulder pasty, or the chorizo scotch egg. The lamb is barbecued on the Josper before oven-roasting for four hours

to reach melting tenderness, then encased in the best short pastry and served with a minted pea purée and minted gravy. The tasty scotch egg is served with piccalilli, not too sharp, but redolent of the turmeric that gives both flavour and brightness.

We started our meal at the Lion with an Aperol spritz and a deliciously cold glass of Batch 95, dripping with icy condensation, a wonderful alcohol-free, hoppy, citrusy lager made in Sandbach. With the first courses ordered, we enjoyed a glass of chilled Chateau Saint Pierre Rosé from Provence. Our selection of small plates and nibbles to start included king prawns, swathed in a langoustine butter emulsion, crab and Cheddar croquettes, and the chicken satay – flavoursome thigh meat in a Malaysian marinade served with ribbons of cucumber and a peanut sauce. The crispy Welsh lamb breast with a malt vinegar sauce was an unusual contrast to the more ubiquitous pork or beef spare ribs, and the focaccia, with its open texture, perfect for scooping up the balsamic vinegar and olive oil as well as any leftover sauces. John enjoyed a pork, black pudding and nduja pie served with rhubarb and mustard chutney – another pickle for the connoisseur from this outstanding kitchen.

Lamb koftas headed up the main courses, consisting of two generous skewers of lightly spiced quality lamb with a caramelised crust, accompanied by giant couscous scented with turmeric, studded with olives, sprinkled with feta cheese and served with a mint and tarragon sauce and flatbread. It was one of many perfect examples of Krystian's avowed intent to 'enhance, not mask' and this principle held us in excellent stead throughout the meal.

The Lion offers a truly seasonal menu. The salade niçoise is a delicious and imaginative take on the classic with warm, aromatic roasted cherry tomatoes and lightly crushed new potatoes, al dente fine green beans and the most amazing tempura-style anchovies. I must confess to a dislike of marinated anchovies in



above:

The Vietnamese-style noodle bowl: I can still conjure up the taste of the miso and coconut broth

far left:

Tarte tatin served whole for sharing

left:

King prawns in a langoustine butter emulsion

a salad, preferring the traditional salt cure, but this completely changed my opinion.

Our next course was a grilled gammon steak topped with chimichurri, a generous slice of charred pineapple and a surprise underneath. What appeared to be hand-cut chips was, in fact, a serving of finely sliced pommes Anna, golden crisp on the outside and softly layered and melting in the middle. What a delicious idea.

I sampled John's Vietnamese-style noodle bowl. He asked, as a dedicated meat eater, for it to be topped with the beef brisket, but an equally delicious choice would have been the black sesame-crust, grilled tofu. The soy and sesame marinated oyster mushrooms were a fabulous textural contrast and I can still conjure up the taste of the miso and coconut broth, it was so good. Spring onions and radish added a welcome crunch and colour.

I can't leave the main courses without mentioning the gnocchi. The golden brown potato pillows were served on a creamy herby

pea sauce, a hazelnut pesto and garnished with pea shoots and... the 'cheese with no name'. This delicious semi-hard cheese is made by a lady named Anne Clayton, local to Malpas, who went to Switzerland, fell in love and stayed for 10 years. She perfected the art of making Alpine cheese and the rest is history.

The Lion has an interesting take on a wine list, offering its most special labels in either 375ml carafes or by the bottle. We enjoyed a white Lyrarakis Assyrtiko from Crete, which had an almost salty finish and a citrus, white-fleshed fruit body, and a red Massaya Le Colombier from Lebanon, which certainly nipped at the heels of one of my favourite reds, Chateau Musar.

So to dessert and that perfect party piece, the legendary tarte tatin, with caramelised apples set on a crisply golden puff of pastry oozing with toffee, topped with a richly unctuous clotted cream Cheshire Farm ice cream and drizzled with double cream.

It's served whole for sharing and I leave you to guess how much we consumed.

We also tried a slice of the baked matcha cheesecake, with a blueberry compote that contrasted with the gentle but distinctive taste of the creamy pud. The strawberry and chipotle upside-down cake was equally irresistible and the subtle afterburn of the chilli well-measured. A dollop of clotted cream and a sprinkling of candied lime zest was instrumental in helping it slide down.

A restorative and fragrant coffee rounded off our truly great evening.

I do recommend you book when you venture out to the Lion; although tables are always available for the spontaneous diners, the word is getting about and deservedly so. ●

Nibbles and small plates

from £6.50 to £9

Main courses from

£16 to £30

Puddings from £6 to £16 (shared)

Wines from £6.10 a glass, from £14 a carafe and from £23.50 a bottle