



# Gastro town

**Richard O Smith** finds out why Thame is becoming the foodie's destination of choice

**L**et's start with a question. What year was the word 'gastropub' invented? The answer can be traced to a specific pub. In the ensuing two and a bit decades (there's a massive clue to help your guess) since the word made the *OED*, countless pubs have made a claim for the prefix 'gastro'. But few have owned the rebrand as convincingly as The Thatch in Thame.

The Thatch is still a proper pub in all respects – it has an inviting fire, steps descending to a cosy snug and you can come in off the main street for nothing more than a drink. It also serves food that has seen it claim the vertiginous runners-up spot in the *Observer Food Magazine* awards for three consecutive years. It was second in the 'Best Restaurant in the South' category. Not bad for any top establishment, especially a pub in an Oxfordshire market town. And yes, they do offer more than crisps and pork scratchings.

Perhaps even more remarkable than the quality of the food on offer are the prices. General manager Evelin Rae is hopeful of being recognised with a Michelin star. She and head chef Tom Upham would be deserving recipients if they gain the accolade.

Yet this restaurant is affordable to most requiring a superior dining experience. Affordable in a way most award winning restaurants reviewed in weekend colour supplements are indubitably not. At The Thatch it's possible to get a top class main course for £12.50 and several for £13.50.

The Thatch has a flexible capacity for around 75 diners. On a Wednesday lunchtime the place was humming with busyness yet a reassuring calmness prevailed. Although the building dates from 1550, Evelin has only been there for the last six of those 465 years. Six years is a long time in the catering trade to stay in one place – an admission that she is satisfied with her current circumstances.

"I have been here for six years, like watching a baby grow up. We want to keep giving great food and service, and continue building our reputation," she said.

Formerly the manager of restaurants in Warwick and Kirtlington, and a graduate of the Estonian Business School, she evidently believes in staff empowerment.

"We write all our own menus. Head chef, sous chef and me sit down to discuss and taste all our menus." Part of the cost of each meal is donated to charitable cause The Peach Foundation. "We donated a greenhouse to a local school to help children understand where food comes from," she added proudly.



**Goldie, Landlord of The James Figg, Thame**

For starters I opt for seared scallops in a lobster sauce. I am too slow picking up my cutlery and my wife stabs a scallop. She confirms it is "delectable". Seconds later I concur. My friend Sarah displays more cultivated table manners and eats her baked Golden Cenarth cheese with truffle honey while mainly emitting Homer Simpson "Mmmmm..." sounds.

My wife's free-range smoked duck, almond, watercress with quackling – something she admits mainly ordering for that final pun – is declared "scrumptious". "Ducky you," I say – discovering the fashion for duck puns was very short lived.

After difficult but unrushed pondering we order the mains. My Barnsley lamb chop with parsnip and smoked paprika puree and butternut squash fondue is bursting with taste. Sarah has a rump steak cooked to optimum colour and tenderness complemented by a peppercorn sauce and chips defined by the adjective "yummy".

Mrs Smith chooses cod with clams, saffron and haricot fricassee and

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brands it “wonderfully heartening on many levels”. If you think a fricassee is just for Christmas to disguise week old turkey, then try this taste sensation.

“The desserts are how you tell a place does really good quality food,” announces Sarah. As you have probably deduced, Sarah is a dessert devotee. Her dessert spoon has sampled some of the best offerings the sweet trolleys of Europe and the Americas can provide.

One of her favourite things about being an adult is that she can skip main courses and have two desserts for her dinner. Her verdict on the panna cotta? “Superb. Sometimes they’re over-gelatinised and that produces a slightly rubbery texture. This is gorgeous in both taste and texture.” As is the white chocolate and raspberry mouse that is simply ambrosial.

One of our party chooses a cheese course. There is a choice of two: “Individual Cheese Plate” or “Full Cheese Board to Share (or not!)”. My wife opts for the former and shares, allowing us to nibble on delectable Carré de Sologne made from unpasteurised goat’s milk. Presentation remained immaculate throughout all the courses.

Thames’ abundance of eateries is confirmed when I visit the James Figg pub in the same main street. Basking in the radiant glow of a central wood burning stove, the James Figg offers an attracting ambiance now that the last of the autumnal leaves have dropped and the sun appears to have opted for working only part time until next Spring.

Positioned right in the centre of Thame in Cornmarket, it couldn’t be more convenient for the frequent 280 bus constantly taking passengers to Aylesbury and Oxford. A good transport option if wishing to partake of the pub’s well-kept four British ales and Cornish lager. They even offer a “Sip before you sup” initiative to encourage more adventurous ordering.

Like The Thatch, six years ago it also underwent a transformation. Shedding its former incarnation of The Abingdon Arms, landlord Tom “Goldie” Goldsmith has transformed the place into an unpretentious but welcoming “proper pub”.

Firstly the establishment was renamed to honour Thame pugilist James Figg (1684-1734) – inventor of the boxing ring and undisputed champion of England. A heritage blue plaque on the building celebrates his local residency.

There are considered touches, such as the boxing gloves that indicate table numbers, knowingly retro white tin plates and recycled treacle tins reimagined as sugar containers.

The food is good, tasty, well-presented and, crucially, very affordable. Their signature burger, aptly called “The James Figg Burger” comes with an included choice of cheeses and a separate packet of delightfully cooked chips in a paper pouch. All for £9.

My friend Gill had a fish finger sandwich that she reserved the adjective “excellent” to describe. Her goujons of breaded fish were, she said, “crisp on the outside but juicy on the inside”. All served in a nutty, fresh granary bap with lettuce and tartar sauce. Her side order of chips were “deliciously crunchy”. “Generous helpings, friendly staff, unstuffy décor – a



The Thatch eatery

proper pub,” she declared enthusiastically. Two 13 year-old boys in our party also approved greatly – which is a very good sign given the famed uncommunicativeness of many 13 year-olds.

On a previous visit to the James Figg after a book signing I opted on a reader’s recommendation for their free-range ham, egg and chips. Delightfully tasty, great value food served in a friendly environment. Only the irretrievably pretentious could fail to enjoy good simple vittles that won’t go out of fashion.

Thame’s growing foody reputation – its annual food festival grew to 270 stalls this autumn – is quickly becoming the Ludlow of the south.

Oh, and the word ‘gastropub’ first came into existence in 1991 in Clerkenwell, London.

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• The Thatch, 29-30 Lower High Street, Thame. <http://www.thethatchthame.co.uk/>

• The James Figg, 21 Cornmarket, Thame. <http://thejamesfiggthame.co.uk>