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carol.emmas@wrbm.com
or 07947 374697

RESTAURANT REVIEW

HINDS HEAD

High Street, Bray
Berkshire SL6 2AB

hindsheadbray.com



The Hinds Head was the second acquisition in Bray by largely self-taught chef, Heston Blumenthal OBE. Although the riverside Berkshire village frequently wins Britain in Bloom, it is better known for retaining an annual tally of six Michelin stars.

Such accolades are equally held between Blumenthal for his present-day, 14 (plus)-course, £180 tasting menu at the Fat Duck opposite (previously the Ringers) and Michel Roux's refined-classical, Waterside Inn, where starters average at £40. Blumenthal bought the village's last independent pub, the Crown (now feted for its hamburger) in 2010. Possibly explaining the purchase was the newspaper report that Marco Pierre White (who Blumenthal briefly worked with) had shown interest in bringing it into his own portfolio.

In addition to centuries of vicars (a local historian believes a tunnel once linked the pub to nearby church), visitors to the Hinds Head have included Errol Flynn and Walt Disney. Purportedly Prince Philip held his stag night within these walls, too.

Kevin Love is head chef of two years' standing. Love previously built both resilience and an eye for consistency heading kitchens at high-class events; these included a banquet for 500 at Westminster Abbey. His role today represents a five-year ambition. Although no dishes appear on the menu without Blumenthal's "seal of approval", it is under Love's tenure that the Hinds Head was garnered Michelin Pub of the Year 2011.

Try a take on a 19th-century recipe

(historical menu references also drive Dinner at Knightsbridge's Mandarin Oriental). An intricate hash of English snails (£11.75) used the same specimens which feature in next door's snail porridge. Served away from their shells, and decorated with microherbs, parsley, tarragon, fennel, their savoury quality reacts well with René Muré Pinot Gris (£7.45–17.5cl glass) from Alsace, from a mostly European list by Peter Lowe of Berkmann Wines.

Blumenthal advocates slow cooking, which he says lends moisture, and dishes may include a pork belly heated over three days. Showing slow cooking after an initial roast, substantial veal chop (£29.50) with sauce "reform" is harmonious with the light tannins and reined-in fruit of Guy Allion's Pinot Noir, Loire, France (£7.50 a glass).

Finally, majoring on Maury from Mas Amiel, a version of 17th-century Chocolate Wine Slush, which "provokes lust", according to culinary historian, Ivan Day, proves a dense, dark granita (£7.95).

The pub's counter provides a haven for locals and diners completing a post-meal analysis of the Fat Duck. Intriguing drinks include Rebellion IPA, Somerset Stargazer cider and Mediterranean Gin Mare, served with rosemary.

As with former head chef, Dominic Chapman, who now runs the Royal Oak in nearby Paley Street, where the clientele can seem equally as jarring, Love plans a new kitchen (the current one is also home to the Fat Duck's sauce chef).

■ Douglas Blyde

SOMMELIER IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Mariano Braga
Sommelier, Buenos Aires



I'm 25 and a sommelier from Argentina with a personal challenge: I had to taste 2,011 wines over 2011. It was a challenge, clearly, especially considering maintaining an average of 5.5 corkages daily was a daunting task. The point is The Challenge 2011 (or "El Desafío 2011"), would have no meaning without sharing it.

The experiences, findings and also disappointments are always more attractive (or less terrible, as the case may be) when we are not alone. So every Monday throughout 2011 I shared on my website each and every one of the moments spent in the previous seven days.

With a suitcase in my hand, in 2011 I travelled along the most

diverse geographies; wandered the world's southernmost vineyards in Argentina's Patagonia; visited one of the origins of wine in the beautiful Greek island of Santorini; and discovered the outstanding flavours of Sangiovese in its native land at Montalcino.

The work was unwavering; against all odds, every Monday a new adventure appeared. It was tiring, but you cannot imagine how great it felt when a winemaker told me they followed the weekly videos, or when I got an email from Los Angeles, Milan, London or Rio asking me about this madness, which I never thought would come this far. Exactly 2,011 wines tasted, 60 videos that were played 20,000 times and about US\$37,000 spent (or invested?). The challenge may have finished, but there are many more good things about to come.

marianobraga.com

“Maintaining an average of 5.5 corkages daily was a daunting task”