

FT Series Autumn feast — a Food & Drink special**Restaurants****The Olive Branch Pub, Clipsham: 'too adorable' – restaurant review**

The excellent food and endearingly undesigned decor fill Tim Hayward with joy



Pork pie: 'a golden construction like some pastry papal crown'

Tim Hayward YESTERDAY

In need of a meal during a long-haul drive up the A1, I found a website for The Olive Branch in Clipsham. I was delighted to read on the tiny screen of my phone that *The Good Pub Guide* had appointed it Country Dining Pub of the Year 2018.

It was only once I was in the car park that I realised I'd been betrayed by my new glasses. It was "county dining pub" — not in itself a shabby accolade — it's just that the county is Rutland. Eighteen miles by 17. Motto — *multum in parvo*.

Free-draining sandy soil, 57 fine churches and the only county in the UK [without a McDonald's](#). The place pretty much defines bijou: three little cottages knocked together surrounded by an idyllic garden. If I had a single word to describe the scale it would be "Hornby".

Part of the appeal of The Olive Branch is that it feels untouched. I don't mean "untouched since 1650", or even 1950. It's just that nobody has come in and hosed the place with agonisingly subtle shades of grey/beige, nailed up quirky knickknackery or installed modern-yet-timeless Italian light fittings. It's endearingly undesigned.

Being so close to [Melton Mowbray](#), I felt compelled to start with a big chunk of the pub's own pork pie, a golden construction like some pastry papal crown. The filling was juicy of itself, rather than relying on dispiriting volumes of jelly, and they had cunningly inserted a layer of cheese.

It sounds modestly "pubby" on the menu but there's some serious craftsmanship on show. Heritage beetroot, pickled with a well-judged sweet/sour balance and served with goat's cheese ice cream, was a simple idea, outstanding in its execution. The Olive Branch held a Michelin star from 2002 to 2013 and the kitchen, it seems, still has the chops.



Heritage beetroot and iced goat's cheese

My main course was a roast fillet of Scottish hake with curried pearl barley and “sea herbs”. It sounds odd but the pearl barley was revelatory.

It was a sort of wet risotto, or maybe a farro, but if you're thinking curry powder, think again. The spice was closer to what the French call *vadouvan* — douce, light and fragrant. There was a sprinkling of crisped wild rice, lashings of coriander and a drift of grated egg that seemed a nod to some buried folk memory of curry condiments.

It was a satisfying thing to find under a piece of hake the size and texture of a mermaid's tail, flaking and cooked to opalescence at the core. Keep [“the omelette test”](#) — this is the kind of dish

by which a chef should be judged. It shows extreme technical competence with the fish and a balance of creativity, innovation and restraint in the accompaniments.

The Olive Branch used to be renowned for its “dessert board” so I felt I really ought to go large. “Lovage parfait, cream cheese, Granny Smith apple, toasted oats” looked breathtaking — thank God there’s someone left who realises that an artistically arranged plate involves more than a *MasterChef* train wreck on custom crockery — and combined the elegant lightness of a palate cleanser with the solid joy of a proper pudding.

“Poached pear, sweet cheese ice cream, hazelnut, thyme” showed similarly cracking technique and balance. Neither dessert would have been out of place in any starred venue but both were thrown into the shade by an Eccles cake served with a wodge of [Cropwell Bishop blue cheese](#) and mounds of Earl Grey-flavoured “diplomat” cream.

An Eccles cake is always good but can err towards austerity. This one had been rendered voluptuous, by a process I can only guess involved finding ways to introduce more butter in defiance of the laws of physics.

The Olive Branch filled me with joy. The surroundings are charming with a degree of ramshackleness that bespeaks shy authenticity. It was filled with happy people — locals who can’t believe their luck and a few travellers who know its secret.

When a restaurant gets stars, a flush of new customers arrives, raising prices and expectations. If it loses stars, we often judge it harshly. Eating at the once-starred Olive Branch made me seek out the criteria by which [Michelin awards them](#).

Sitting in the dining room today, I can see that the place is just too damn adorable, too comfortable to compete. It would need work to bring it up to one-star status, but then I noticed the criteria for two stars are “excellent cooking, worth a detour” and for that The Olive Branch definitely qualifies.

The Olive Branch Pub

Main Street, Clipsham, Rutland LE15 7SH; 01780 410 355; theolivebranchpub.com

Starters (lunch) £6.75-£12.50

Mains (lunch) £14.75-£26.50

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