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MY LIDL DINNER PARTY

NICK CURTIS SERVES A GOURMET MENU ON A
CREDIT CRUNCH SUPERMARKET BUDGET — PAGE 39

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Food & Reviews

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No pretensions: Angela Hartnett and head chef Colin Buchan in the main restaurant

Restoration in the best of taste

YORK & Albany is a handsome old coaching inn, part of John Nash's scheme for the whole of Regent's Park, carried out in the 1820s. Unfortunately, Parkway, on which it stands, is now a roaring six-lane highway and the building had been derelict for 20 years before being bought by Gordon Ramsay Holdings.

The original plan had been simply to turn it into another of Ramsay's gastropubs but, when it was found that the building could offer much more, the scheme was enlarged to become the first GRH hotel, with 10 "boutique suites", a delicatessen in the old stables — and two restaurants overseen by Angela Hartnett with Colin Buchan as head chef.

The design is by Russell Sage, who has recently worked on Stapleford Park hotel and is now tackling the Savoy for Ramsay. He has brought off a convincing blend of antique and contemporary, which feels good as soon as you walk in, moving easily from a formal, corniced Regency room into a modern, more minimal extension for the main restaurant.

None of this would make any odds if the food was no good — but, as it happens, it's hugely enjoyable. I'm reluctant to subscribe to the theory that women cook differently from men but Angela Hartnett's food does seem to be straightforwardly about giving her customers pleasure and satisfaction in a way that's rare among male chefs at her level, so

Gordon Ramsay's first foray into hotels is a triumph on two counts: its historic setting — and the woman in the kitchen



RESTAURANT REVIEW OF THE WEEK

DAVID SEXTON

York & Albany
127-129 Parkway, NW1 (020 7388 3344,
www.gordonramsay.com)
£100 for two
★★★★☆

Tap water service:
Iced water swiftly brought

preoccupied with outdoing one another and striving for star-ratings.

From the starters, pumpkin risotto with 18-month matured gorgonzola (£8) was just perfectly textured risotto, made with a vegetable stock, incorporating cubes of pumpkin added at the end among the deliciously salty melted bits of blue cheese. The decoration of pumpkin seeds seemed a dodgy idea. They were like little chips of wood — easily avoided, though.

Fried duck's egg with field mushrooms, Jerusalem artichoke and parmesan was simply the yummiest fry-up, each element coming together in a dish that was all about eating pleasure, nothing to do with a chef or a kitchen showing off. It was an autumnal version of the grilled asparagus with duck egg described in Angela Hartnett's cookbook, *Cucina*, and like that "simple produce cooked in season with little complication", Italian in that, if nothing else.

From the mains, which run from £14 to £22, fish stew with piperade and fennel and flat-leaf parsley (£14) was far from stewed, being more of a nage. These juicy prawns, pieces of cod, monkfish and red mullet had had no more than a judicious swim in an intense fishy stock, warmly spiced with saffron, plus perhaps a little chilli and ginger. It was textbook stuff, served with soft, beauti-

fully caramelised strips of fennel. Red-leg partridge with curly kale and truffle chips (£18) tackled the problem of the breast and legs of the bird needing different cooking times head-on. The breast had been taken off the bone and lightly cooked through; the legs had been done so thoroughly they were almost confit, the meat soft.

These natty portions, accompanied by a well-reduced jus, sat on a little pommes mousseline, so smooth and full of butter and cream that the mash amounted to a delicious sauce, rather than an actual vegetable. For that, there were some fantastically light and crispy handcut chips, just scented with a little truffle flavour, served like everything else in a pretty copper pan. With all this unctuousity, the bright green curly kale looked appealingly fresh and simple — but it was, as it always is, a fibrous waste of space ("Kale I have always hated," pronounced Jane Grigson). Cavolo nero, full-grown spinach, or savoy cabbage would have been better.

The pudding list, at £6, is pretty classic (prune and Armagnac tart with clotted cream, say, or chocolate parfait with hazelnut ice-cream, or roasted William pear). We managed only some macerated fruit, served with a lychee and grappa granita that soon melted down into a tasty syrup — and a little first-rate

cheese, including a brilliantly tangy Stilton and an aromatically truffled Caprino. With the bill came, unsolicited, a retro carton of fresh popcorn, heavily caramelised — a neat gimmick but surely the last thing you want to do to your teeth after a great meal?

The intelligent wine list starts at £16.50 a bottle, or £4 a glass, and includes a range of 50cl carafes. Service is friendly but highly professional in the distinctive manner of all who prosper in Ramsay's outfit. Yet York & Albany has a different feel from Ramsay's other restaurants and gastropubs, I'm sure as a result of Angela Hartnett's own generosity and lack of pretention. They're a good combo.

On Ramsay's website, York & Albany is off-puttingly described as "a lifestyle experience with food at its heart, in surroundings that capture the elegance of the Regency period". But, even just opened, the place really works. Hartnett's rustic delicatessen is charming, and the chef's table room downstairs, in sumptuous red silk and velvet, looks extraordinary.

This is both a splendid rescue of a historic site and a real addition to London's restaurant scene. For the moment, prices are no higher than those of the swishier gastropubs — and there's a three-course lunch menu at £15, which I plan to investigate myself asap. Camden just got lucky.

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