

BAUMANN'S BRASSERIE

Forged from a legend

When the late, great, restaurateur extraordinaire Peter Langan asked Mark Baumann to take command of the kitchen at his new venture few realised it would sow the seeds of such a popular and enduring attraction. Piers Ford samples the delights of Baumann's Brasserie.

As a role model, Peter Langan takes some beating. The legendary Irish restaurateur and epicurean was a bon viveur of Shakespearean dimensions who took few prisoners. He died in a fire in 1988 but he remains an inspiration to his final business partner, Mark Baumann.

The personable proprietor of Baumann's Brasserie in Coggeshall, accepted Langan's invitation to cook at his new venture in the picturesque north Essex village in 1986. When his boss died it seemed natural to take over the reins. He got a bank loan and bought the business. Over a decade later he is still there.

Langan's influence is still palpable in the eclectic art works which cover the walls and in the philosophy of Baumann and his staff to provide excellent food in an attractive environment, with discrete service and a lack of formality. Baumann has built on the Langan legacy without falling prey to his hero's excesses.

"Being a man with a drink problem, he had fiery times. But he was a great showman," Baumann remembers. "He wasn't your normal boss and that

was quite odd because in the Michelin-starred restaurants I'd been used to, everything comes from under a cloche and there's one waiter for each customer. I was really excited by this guy who suggested that was all unnecessary."

Baumann's father was the Managing Director of a hotel in Egham, Surrey. Young Mark grew up loving the catering and hospitality environment. After college, he worked for the Relais and Chateaux Group of luxury hotels, learning his trade from some of the most experienced chefs in the business. He finished up at Hintfesham Hall in Suffolk where, one evening, he fell into conversation with Langan. The rest is history.

On a busy Saturday night the clientele was, as Baumann promised, very mixed. Smart sat alongside casual without any sidelong glances.



Mark Baumann

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The atmosphere was buzzing and convivial but everyone had plenty of space (full, the restaurant seats 75 guests). The air was pleasantly unstuffy; smokers must go to the bar for their between-course fixes.

Baumann insists on ingredients of the highest quality and this is reflected in the diverse menu. So is his policy of "slinging together funky ingredients, but only if they work."

My gammon terrine on a bed of grenadine-steeped onions (£5.95) was an exciting combination which left a lingering sweetness on the palate. My dining companion assured me that her chicken and pineapple satay (£6.25) was equally piquant, so I was obliged to taste and agree. The peanut sauce was just the right side of hot for a starter.

We both chose relatively conventional main courses. My cheese and garlic stuffed chicken breast (£13.95) could, perhaps, have done with a little more garlic but the meat was succulent and tender. My companion's halibut (£15.95) was perfectly cooked.

But the inspiration lay in the generous side helping of mashed sweet potato which was greeted with rapturous approval. Indeed, the quality of the vegetables overall was exceptional: fresh and al dente.

The food could be loosely termed 'European', but the desserts smack of good old English comfort. We shared sticky toffee apple pudding (£5.50) which was light, moist and not over-sweet and a brandy snap basket filled with delicately-flavoured home-made ice creams (£5).

Accompanied by a good bottle of modestly priced Chateau Ribebon Bordeaux '97 (£15.25) from a promising wine list, and coffee, our evening carried a price tag of £71.15. The service was efficient, friendly and never overbearing.

Baumann's Brasserie is a chameleon of a restaurant, serving the requirements of both business lunchers and social diners, sometimes simultaneously. All customers are pleasingly referred to as 'guests'. As such, we left feeling thoroughly well-treated. ✓

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