



Review

## Reach for a star

Stella Morris visited the Cliff House Hotel, Co. Waterford, and found a menu of local ingredients that engaged the senses.

There have been plenty of stars over the years in Ardmore, the Wicklow movie studios currently pillaging public-voting TV awards worldwide with their bodice-ripping, rip-roaring, cod (piece) history of the Tudor monarchy, but possibly none that have given as much pleasure to as many people as a star currently shining in another Ardmore - Martijn Kajüter at the Cliff House Hotel in Ardmore, County Waterford.

Since opening in 2008 the Cliff House has been added to the short but growing list of destination restaurants around this country, and when myself and Charlie called in for coffee in the afternoon and asked to have a look at the evening's tasting menu, being told we couldn't because the chef hadn't written it yet is probably part of the reason why. A good sign, as the chef wanted all his ducks in a row, so to speak (Skeaghanore ducks from just down the road, no doubt) before he made the call on what was best to include that day.

Martijn Kajüter has become a large fixture in the local community since he moved to Waterford from his native Holland - large, as he is almost 6'9" in his stockinged feet and large, insofar as he has become involved in sourcing his local ingredients in a very real, hands-on way, with his own gardens supplying produce and working with St. Raphael's Centre in Youghal to grow many of the flavours incorporated into the 7 course tasting menu we enjoyed the other night.

Setting out his stall for the restaurant being as local as can be, the menu gets up close and personal by naming as many specific

ingredients as possible by source, as Martijn is very serious about the provenance of his provender, and reckons nearly everything he uses comes from within a 30 mile radius of the hotel.

The tasting menu itself - scallop, salmon, pigeon, lobster, beef, soufflé and dark chocolate - was entertaining, accomplished, stylish and damn tasty. We chose the tasting menu accompanied by wines and in every instance the selection worked wonderfully with the food. The tasting menu costs €85 with an extra €40 for wines with each course.

Dinner began somewhat disconcertingly with what seemed like an enormous amuse-bouche of beetroot, Ardsallagh goat's cheese and cucumber foam served in a big heavy glass. Looking alarmingly substantial for a pre-dinner mouth teaser to a 7 course journey, once begun it actually melted away into essences of the three elements, and set the tone of controlled fun and structured play that lasted for the rest of the meal.

The starter of scallops with asparagus textures was a single perfect scallop (properly small and rich, not a bloated waterlogged monstrosity), accompanied by a variety of asparagus in the form of green jellyish cubes, roasted and thickly sea salted spears, and some simple steamed pieces.

The organic Clare Island salmon, marsh samphire, cucumber and smoke, served with a glass of Fiano from Campania, won the Most Fun Dish of the Evening, as a clear glass cloche filled with smoke arrived to the table, bringing a touch of Amsterdam to Ardmore from the Dutch chef. With his great height

and the teeny tiny elements of some of the dishes, the idea of fairy tales and myths doesn't seem so far away, so pressing your thumb to the skin of the smoky salmon under the dome and sucking on it might lead you to expect a sudden rush of knowledge to the brain instead of the sudden rush of smoky flavour to the back of the throat you do get.

Ardmore lobster and bone marrow with parsley, garlic and lemon was possibly my very favourite dish, with a delightfully huge ignorant bone stuffed with delectable things and a long pointy fork arriving out almost as a two-fingered haha! to the delicate artistry of the fairyland miniature chanterelles and starchy borage flowers that accompanied the previous course of Annesgrove pigeon with foie gras, chanterelle and sheep snout apple. The pigeon came with a glass of French Pinot Gris, Les Elements, Domaine Bott-Geyl 2005, and the lobster in the bone had a glass of Austrian Grüner Veltliner Smaragd Terrassen, Domäne Wachau 2007, each of which was perfectly judged to complement the respective tastes.

The test tube held by a clothes peg when it was poured over the following course of beef fillet was full of Kilbeggan whiskey and beef tea, giving a theatrical sense of mystery and fun. The little nuggets of beauty in that particular dish were contributed by cubes of swede that had also undergone some alchemical transformation into pure gold. The fillet was accompanied by a super Spanish Monastrell from Viña Elena.

The messages sent by the simple contemporary glasses, clean slate butter dishes and plain linen napkins are mixed somewhat by the addition of cut-glass tumblers and table vases, handmade pottery cloches and traditional Wedgwood china, but I do get the final overarching idea that local is best, and if spreading that message means looking a little like a pot-luck dinner, where everyone in the family has contributed a place setting, then so be it. But in a place where everything on the plate is considered, reconsidered, and then super-reconsidered, my sophisticated, complex meal being accompanied by cheesy Barbra Streisand or the schmaltzy Bee Gees (How deep is your love?) seemed like a mismatch.

The chef at Ardmore has done something good in showcasing the fine local ingredients from the area in complicated, engaging and involving food. The theatrical touches and showmanship look like those of a man with one eye to some stars too, and why not? His reach is longer than most.

*The Cliff House Hotel, Ardmore, Co. Waterford*  
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