

eating out

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Stars in their eyes

*The experimental food at the Cliff House Hotel
blows Katy McGuinness away*



NO, I'D NEVER heard of a 62 degree egg either but if you ever have the opportunity to try one, do – you won't regret it. The egg is cooked overnight in the oven at a consistent 62 degrees, and then served up as a substantial amuse gueule with cheese foam, broad beans, peas and a minted potato galette. Or, at least, it was the night we dined at Barry O'Callaghan's stunning new Cliff House Hotel in picturesque Ardmore, Co Waterford, but it will probably be long gone from the menu by the time you read this review because executive chef Martijn Kajuiter changes his menu several times a week, adjusting the offering in response to day-by-day seasonal variations in the produce available to him.

At the Cliff House, the fish comes from the Helvick and Ardmore Bays, the meat is from local butchers in Lismore and Youghal, and vegetables are grown in the hotel's

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own vegetable garden at the St Raphael's Resource Centre in Youghal in a unique collaboration.

There are shades of Heston Blumenthal laboratory experimentation in Kajuiter's cooking and a degree of showmanship that would suggest that this is a man in pursuit of stars. The food is executed with passion and presented exquisitely, with no small amount of wit. Most importantly though, it tastes superb – our meal at the Cliff House was memorable.

On this occasion we were five, which gave us an opportunity to sample a good cross-section of the menu. Hot loaves of seaweed brioche were

wonderful although any seaweed

flavour was hard to discern, much to the relief of Milo (11). The standout among the starters was the Organic Clare Island salmon, cucumber, horseradish and smoke. Served in a perspe

ctive of swirling smoke, this was intensely flavoured and quite fabulous. We also liked the Skeaghanore duck served with courgette, yoghurt and raspberries, and the West Cork scallops with artichoke, olive oil and blossom. Vegetable Salad 2008 with goat's cheese and hazelnut was a vindication of the hard work that has been put into the vegetable garden at St Raphael's.

Among the mains, the star turns were the Irish free-range pork, Helvick prawn, radish and mint; and the organic chicken served with bacon and a divine bread pudding made with morels. Helvick monkfish, potato, broad beans and basil was excellent too. Ardmore Bay lobster with black pudding, asparagus and hazelnut was slightly disappointing, the lobster not as flavoursome as we might have hoped.

Handily, the menu offered five pudding choices and we ordered one of each. The dark chocolate, rock salt, olive oil, coffee and lemon 2008 – lemon in several textures were a joy, both visually and on the palate.

Local plums, caramel, almond, vanilla and fromage frais soufflé; and the blueberries, yoghurt and pistachio paled in comparison to the chocolate and lemon options but in another, less stimulating, restaurant would probably have stood out in their own right. Irish cheeses included Milleens, Ardrahan, St Gaul and an exceptional Cashel Blue. The chocolate lollipops with raspberry compote and brandy snaps that accompanied our coffees were a playful touch, reminiscent of something similar that Dylan McGrath produces at Mint.

We were guests of the hotel on this occasion, but the three-course dinner is

The Cliff House Hotel

Ardmore, Co Waterford
Tel: 024 87800 www.thecliffhousehotel.com
Rating: *****

€62.50 (with a €5 supplement for cheese) and the six-course tasting menu, in which the whole table must participate, is €72.50. These are bargain prices for labour-intensive food of this exceptional quality and innovation – worth it just to be able to tell the story of the 62 degree egg.