

Mother's Day and Easter

Riverside triumphs - even in adversity

*With two of the hospitality year's busiest occasions approaching, custom is there to be had as people dine out at these times in their droves. EC visited **The Riverside Inn at Aymestrey**, Herefordshire to discover what sets this gem of a place apart from the competition – not just local, but national as The Riverside won Best Tourism Pub in 2018 and recently garnered the Slow Food Award for Best Restaurant / Food Eatery in the UK*

When we arranged to visit Andy Link, Chef Patron of the exquisite Riverside Inn at Aymestrey, near Ludlow, the intention was to learn just why the Inn is so popular – they routinely have to turn away in excess of 300 covers both on Mother's Day and at Easter.

Not only did we experience for ourselves what it is that ensures repeat visits time after time, but we also witnessed hospitality at the very top of its game in entirely unforeseen circumstances.

Our visit coincided with the devastating Storm Dennis in February that numbered The Riverside Inn as one of its casualties. When we arrived for Sunday lunch, the River Lugg, which flows just metres from the Inn, was yet to burst its banks. Before pudding was served, the river was wreaking havoc, not only in the car park but also in the cellar where freezers, laundry and bottles were cursorily destroyed by the muddy flood water.



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Chef Patron Andy Link joined the **Slow Food** programme eight years ago. Aligned to the programme is **The Ark of Taste**, which lists products that are in danger of being lost and forgotten. A good source of information for chefs and restaurants throughout the UK, products local to Andy include a variety of heritage apples, Mortimer Forest Venison, The Shropshire Prune and Three Counties Perry

Keeping calm and carrying on

Splitting his time between providing impeccable service in the busy pub restaurant and keeping an eye on the advancing water outside was the exemplary George Parkes, general manager. Gliding swanlike between tables he gently suggested to diners that they might like to move their cars before their next course arrived as things had taken a turn for the worse outside. Here was the ultimate Captain of the Ship, for even though George's own car was at risk, it stayed where it was until he was certain that everyone else's vehicles were safe.

So what has this got to do with The Riverside's offer? Everything. George's unflappable manner and unwavering commitment to ensuring that customers were having the best time possible are indicative of the entire operation.

Similarly, Chef Andy had to momentarily leave the kitchen to rescue his two dogs from his house next door as the ground floor was now flooded. Once the dogs were warm and dry, service continued seamlessly, accommodating numerous extra bookings from locals due to flooded homes and cancellations from those further afield – including a party of 50 – who could no longer reach The Riverside due to closed roads and impassable bridges.

Local means local

"This is biblical," said Andy, who had grown up in nearby Lingen and never seen such weather in his life. As a teenager, then student at Aston Business School, he had worked at The Riverside when he still thought his career would be in finance.

"The thing is, I love food – traditional food – and I love cooking. They're in my blood, which made it impossible to do anything else," smiles Andy, who became head chef at The Riverside immediately after graduating. His passion for food is understandable as many of his family are local beekeepers, farmers, shepherds and cider makers.

Having worked as head chef for 10 years, Andy bought The Riverside four years ago when the previous owner retired. While he had been able to make his excellent mark in the kitchen while head chef, since buying the concern, Andy's passions are more widely discernible. Outside, the hillside garden has been landscaped to accommodate fruit tree varieties whose existence are under threat, beehives and an extended kitchen garden.

Within, quarry tiles have been revealed in the renovated bar area, while much of the wall space is adorned with art by local artists. Food, sourced locally, is served on plates made by a local potter.

"To source our food we visit and get to know local farmers and producers so that we know exactly who is providing what for our kitchen," explains Andy. "It's impossible to say that everything is sourced within so many miles, but at all times our menu reflects what the area has to offer, providing it is sustainable and high quality."



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Beetroot & quinoa salad

We have
a double
sitting on
Mother's Day
and open extra
hours over
Easter



Slow Food

An ardent supporter and member of Slow Food, Andy lives and breathes its ethos that links the pleasure of food with a commitment to the community and the environment.

No surprise then that The Riverside has made its mark on the culinary scene both far and wide. While the menu is simple, the food on your plate is exquisite. You can rest assured that every bite you take will not disappoint. I believe that I will never taste pork (sourced locally of course) like this again, unless I return to Aymestrey. As for the roast potatoes, another zenith.

No wonder Andy does not feel the need to radically change his menu in order to entice people in on Mother's Day or at Easter. He spends the entire year enticing people with his food, his ambience and his team of staff who, without exception, each represent the very best of what this fine industry is all about.



Special occasions

So when it comes to occasions such as Mother's Day and Easter, does Andy alter his offer?

"Our offer is always seasonal. We work with the very best ingredients from the local area and enjoy putting our stamp on it, but we are always conscious of what our customers want," says Andy, whose menu contains such unusual and tasty delights as snails from nearby Hereford. "When it comes to special occasions, we stick to our seasonal offer, but enhance our traditional roast dinner by adding extra items throughout the meal, which is then finished with a treat such as bagged up gingerbread at Christmas and petit fours on Mother's Day.

"We want people to trust that we are consistent as this is more important than providing gimmicky menus. To accommodate the extra demand, we have a double sitting on Mother's Day and open extra hours over Easter to create a real buzz all weekend."