

The Discerning DINER

Claudia Blake visits The CB Inn, Arkengarthdale

You're unlikely to meet

many other motorists on the narrow, switchback road that winds up Arkengarthdale to The CB Inn. What you will see, though – and frequently have to dawdle along behind – are plenty of hardy hill sheep.

Arkengarthdale branches away from Swaledale at Reeth. It's a wilder, bleaker valley than its sister dale, and on a stormy night it can seem like the middle of nowhere. Nowadays Arkengarthdale's community is little more than a scattering of hamlets strung out across beautiful moorland scenery, but it was once a far busier place, the bustling centre of a thriving lead-mining industry. Charles Bathurst was the local mine owner, and it is after him that The CB Inn, just beyond Langthwaite, is named.

The CB Inn has retained the cosy, woody ambience of a traditional Dales hostelry, but nudged it in the direction of contemporary taste by incorporating stripped wood furniture, cheery check curtains and – I would guess – a certain number of structural alterations. The result is a spacious bar that leads into a series of light, uncluttered dining areas.

The menu is written on a mirror above an open fire. Not terribly easy on the eye, but at least you're nice and warm while you're deciphering it, and there are plenty of appealing options. There's a decent wine list – inscribed, this time, on paper – with an equally plausible selection of wines by the glass.

Our starters arrived promptly, attractively presented on simple white crockery. Mine, nestled in a deep bowl, was a wild mushroom risotto. Risotto may at heart be simple peasant food, but it's not always easy to get it right. This one, though, ticked all the boxes. The rice was suitably al dente and the mushroom flavours were good and punchy. There was plenty of Parmesan running through it, plus a dash of truffle oil and a brace of Parmesan crisps for good measure. Arguably it was a touch heavy on the salt, but it slipped down very nicely.

Piers started with a trio of mackerel, whose star turn was a roundel of flaky-rich mackerel ballotine. The trio also included a light, crispy fishcake and some sleek rectangles of sharp-sweet pickled mackerel. It was a handsome plateful that combined a good range of flavours and textures, and it made a fine curtain raiser.

My main, Port and venison casserole, was a sensible choice for a chilly night: hearty and comforting, with a strong feeling of good old-fashioned home cooking about it. The meat was tender and gamey, and the sauce was deep and rich with an intriguing hint of warm spiciness – cinnamon, possibly. A couple of light, simple dumplings added to the homely charm. All very satisfactory.

Piers' main was rump of lamb with boulangère potatoes, parsnip purée and a quenelle of confit lamb. The lamb was cooked rare, and there was plenty of it. The confit was meatily luscious, the wad of potato was pleasantly melting, and the parsnip purée was agreeably creamy. Our mains came with a generous selection of accompanying veg – red cabbage, carrot and broccoli amongst them – all of which had an enjoyably healthy crunch.

Desserts were next on the agenda. As readers may know, I'm very fond of crème brûlée, but not quite so enthusiastic about the current trend to try to improve on it by throwing in all manner of needless extras. The CB Inn's take on the classic brûlée – crème brûlée with whisky – was something I hadn't encountered before, so I decided, a little hesitantly, to try it. As it turned out, the combination worked surprisingly well, the whisky adding a subtle, smoky tone to the vanilla-studded and silky-smooth custard.

Delightful. I could have happily polished off a second one.

Piers' choice, plum and apple crumble with custard, came from the same school of cosy home cooking as my venison casserole. With a judicious balance of fruit, and a topping given extra bite by oats and flaked almonds, this was excellent comfort food and a pleasant way to round off the meal.

Altogether, for three courses each, we paid just over £53, that's to say circa £26 per head for the food – with minerals, wine and post-dinner cuppas on top of that, of course. Service had been brisk but friendly enough, and the food was definitely a cut or two above normal pub fare.

In short, then, The CB Inn is an easygoing, relaxed place with good-value, tasty food, thoughtfully prepared and attractively presented. It's evidently a child-friendly venue too – there were a couple of family groups enjoying themselves when we arrived – so it would be a good option for a family function or a place to meet up with friends after a day knocking around in the Dales. Ensuite bedrooms are also available, so you wouldn't necessarily have to negotiate that long and winding road home immediately afterwards.

For further information about The CB Inn call 01748 884567 or visit www.cbinn.co.uk.