

guardian.co.uk

Restaurant review: The Wild Garlic, Beaminster, Dorset

Mat Follas, 2009 MasterChef winner, has opened a restaurant. Has he bitten off more than he can chew? Far from it

Matthew Norman

The Guardian, Saturday 3 October 2009

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)



The Wild Garlic, Beaminster: What a difference a year makes – Matt Follas has gone from winning a TV cooking competition to setting up this little beauty of a restaurant. Photograph: David Partner

Adducing a corpse as a witness for anything is a cheap and distasteful gambit, so let me begin by suggesting that [Keith Floyd](#), who died after lunching elsewhere in Dorset a few days after our visit, would have adored Mat Follas's first restaurant and might even have identified him as the fruit of his culinary loins. Although familiar to many of you as this year's [MasterChef](#) winner, Follas was a new face to me due to the Grossmanophobia that makes watching that show impossible even now, years after that stoic sufferer from irritable vowel syndrome departed. Follas's career is the mirror image of Floyd's, the latter becoming a telly character off the back of being a chef-proprietor and the former achieving the trick in reverse, but otherwise they are as one. The vibrant passion for food – the sourcing and foraging for it, as well as the cooking of it – with which Floyd laid the populist ground for programmes such as [MasterChef](#) shines through at the Wild Garlic in the pretty town of Beaminster.

The Wild Garlic

4 The Square,

Beaminster, Dorset

DT8 3AS

01308 861446

Open lunch, Tues-Sun, noon-2pm (11am-2pm Sun brunch); dinner, Thurs-Sat, 7-11pm.

Price per head for three courses, wine, coffee and service, £40-45.

There is so much else to admire that the traditional Hazgush warning must be issued. The twin traps of fierce lighting and lousy acoustics that often ruin otherwise impressive [restaurants](#) are nimbly avoided. The light green walls are unencumbered by hideous paintings, the furniture is farmhousy solid, and the room resounds with the appetite-stimulating buzz of relaxed people relishing their grub.

The short printed menu, meanwhile, bolstered by a wide range of blackboarded daily specials, is perfectly judged and resists the temptation to impress with technical wizardry that afflicts many gifted amateurs when they turn pro. Follas understands that encouraging first-rate ingredients to taste of themselves has the edge over poncery and ostentation. He also has unusual mastery of presentation, adorning the starters with an

exquisite little salad dotted with edible flowers. Pan-fried garlic scallops (three plump beauties for £7; the pricing of both food and wine is without chutzpah) came alluringly browned, and with absurdly delicious miso-infused seaweed. My wife was lukewarm about her caramelised goat's cheese ("Nice enough, but a bit pointless"), but my smooth, subtle chicken liver pâté was great, while ceviche of brill was spectacularly fresh and zingy, and had a limey kick to keep a fleet of Tudor galleons scurvy-free for a year.

There then followed a moment that had me cooing at Follas's business sense. The inter-course hiatus was plugged by an amuse-bouche of a dozen clams garnished with capers and garlic mayonnaise, one of those cute touches that costs a restaurant thruppence but leaves punters purring at what seems a lavish freebie. Two of us then went for the lemon sole, a vast and blameless fish served whole and on the bone, and laden with more capers and garlic butter. My wife thought her ribeye steak of water buffalo well seasoned and cooked to the ideal medium rarity, but lacking the depth of flavour of beef, and for what the marital ledger reveals to be the ninth time in 18 years of holy wedlock, we were in full agreement there. However, she was wild about the "smoked mash" – a mound of fluffy, creamy potato suffused with a hickory, mesquitish twang – that also came with my five ruby-red slices of sensationally tender and flavoursome sika venison.

Fresh berry mess was magnificent, and chocolate brownies with cream, chocolate twizzle and berries was "absolutely the best I've had outside the Popeseye," said my wife of a beloved west London steak house.

All in all, this was one of the most pleasing meals I've eaten in years, served with warmth and expertise by a dramatically mustachioed manager and a droll waitress in pole position to do something about it, since her day job is running the old-fashioned barber's bang opposite. Follas is an exceedingly rare talent. Nothing the programme could ever accomplish could compensate for unleashing Loyd Grossman on this island, but MasterChef should be very proud of itself indeed.