

FOOD

English grub



Game, beef, claret... and lashings of history. Long may Rules reign over us!

A little Englishness can go an awfully long way. And at Rules, that steadfast old Covent Garden grandee, there's an awful lot of Englishness. The Spy cartoons and photos of the Queen, the stuffed pheasants, prettily framed bucolic vistas and endless alabaster busts.

In one corner, a vast mural of a magnificently coiffed Lady T glares down, ready to do battle with lefties, euros and a Cabinet full of wets. In another, mounted heads of long dead beasts. Part Victorian Oxbridge College, part idiosyncratic museum, it also has more than a whiff (metaphorical, of course) of a Fifties pub. Especially the tattered carpet on the creaky stairs on the way up to the Gent's loo.

Waiters and waitresses wear black and white, banquettes wear a plush red. And the menu wears a few centuries of English eating with tweed-clad, clipped-vowel aplomb. Game's the thing here. In season, they have 'em all, the food of kings and dukes and, um, investment bankers, from big-eyed woodcock - served, as is just and right, complete with head and beak - to grouse, partridge, mallard, pheasant, teal, hare, rabbit and deer. Plus, of course, oysters, salmon, potted shrimps and all those marvellous pies and puddings that we can do so well.

Here, much to the delight of the near constant supply of Huntsmen-clad, properly padded Americans, you can tuck into traditional tucker in rooms



**TOMPARKER
BOWLES**
TOM'S TABLE

Rules

35 Maiden Lane, Covent Garden,
London WC2E 7LB, 020 7836 5314
Mon-Sat 12pm till late ★★★★★

where Dickens once swilled hock, Chaplin broke bread, kings caroused and princes played. Plus, it was adored by Evelyn Waugh, John Betjeman and Graham Greene. Properly great Brits, one and all.

But it could all go so wrong. The picture-crowded walls mere empty set dressing. And that intrinsically English eccentricity can so easily turn to shoddy service and second-rate slop. All those centuries of tall tales and hissed gossip, the whiff of grease paint and sweet smell of success long-passed can too easily become dyspeptic.

A glut of London's history, shoved down one's throat, is stodgy and indigestible, like a lumpen plum pudding. If I want a history lesson, I'll go to the V&A. I'm coming here to eat, not snot.



But I don't think any restaurant in the world has such an eminent list of past patrons (nor any that has played a walk-on role in so many novels, old and new). There is, though, a danger that Rules has become no more than a well-oiled theme park, John Bull World complete with soggy cabbage and Brown Windsor soup.

But somehow, Rules shrugs off the moth-eaten mantle of history, steers clear of mere tourist trap, and remains a great restaurant. We had come for the famed Belted Galloway beef, raised on the owner's Pennine estate. Now, rare breed alone doesn't guarantee a mighty slab of cow. But when properly fed, finished, slaughtered and hung (as they are here), this is serious beef, up there with the best in the land. But we were a

few days early. The carcasses were still ageing up north, but all was not lost. There was heart on the menu, and skirt too. Both are officially classed as offal, and have no need of hanging. Thank god for small mercies, although the menu is handsome, in a David Niven meets Sean Connery sort of way, with endless native oysters and steak and kidney puddings and pheasant curries and gratins of hare.

But we were here for the 'Belties'. And I don't think I've ever eaten a finer piece of heart. Not even at St John. It had all the intensity of great steak, rich and robust, with a mineral tang and a good old-fashioned chew. Served alongside a pile of vinegar, wilted endive, it was splendid in every way. Just like the great sheet of skirt, with its slight honk of visceral filth. Compared to the muted civilities of the fillet steak, it was certainly a bovine bad boy. But it had character

FROM THE MENU

- GAME SOUP £8.95
- POTTED SHRIMPS £13.95
- STEAK & KIDNEY PIE £17.95
- CROWN OF PHEASANT £22.95
- GOLDEN SYRUP SPONGE £7.95

LOCAL HERO

THE JAPAN CENTRE

Decent Japanese ingredients can be hard to find, especially outside the big cities. So for those craving bonito flakes, natto, ramen noodles or ponzu sauce, then online is the easiest option. The Japan Centre (japancentre.com) is always reliable, has a massive range of products and quality is high. Mount Fuji (mountfuji.co.uk) has an interesting range too.

WHAT TOM ATE THIS WEEK

SUNDAY

This damned 5-2 diet is killing me. Who the hell can survive on 600 calories per day? More miso soup, still more rice cakes, another slurp of soup. My belly, though, is as broad as ever.

TUESDAY

Every day off this diet feels like

liberation. Bean salads thrill, and a lamb schawarma sandwich from Fez Mangal on Ladbroke Grove almost floors me with its meaty magnificence.

WEDNESDAY

Lunch at Hereford Road. Beetroot and egg salad, followed by lentils with squash. I realise I've eaten a fully vegetarian

lunch at one of my favourite purveyors of meat.

THURSDAY

More of the hateful diet. And now am continually irritating my wife by informing her of the calorie count of everything she eats. 'Yes,' she replies with a thin smile, 'but as I'm not a great fat greedy pig, I



have no need for boring faddish diets.' I retreat, hurt, with a rice cake.

FRIDAY

To Milton Keynes for a Mr Trotter board meeting. Consume a huge number of pork-related products. Back home, and dinner of flat rice noodles in a beef broth, with fish sauce, lime juice, chillies, herbs and slices of steak.

