

long-hung) venison with buttery parsnip, fondant potato and lightly acidulated red cabbage a preternaturally even rosiness. (The website talks a lot about foraging and working with local gamekeepers, and the quality of the produce is striking.) But it destroys an otherwise blameless slab of brill, with its walnut purée and crisp little nugget of — I think — the fish's cheek. I never want to meet another flabby, denatured piece of fish again as long as I live. If you're going to bung the bugger in a pan to give it a final sear, just bung the bugger in a pan, full stop. Nothing but praise for his duck dish, though: sliced pink breast on a bed of nutty pearl barley, seared endive in a frothy bath of mustard, a fleeting note of elderberry — immaculate.

Desserts are far more classic: a textbook, if stout, construction of crisp pastry, shockingly sharp blood orange jelly mollified by a thick layer of dark chocolate ganache. I expect a rubbly texture

from vanilla rice pudding soufflé, but it's as smooth, bland and airy as marshmallow. Dismissing it initially as dull after one mouthful, its butterscotch ice cream too shy and retiring, after three more it's gone and I'm hooked like a guppy by this study in subtlety.

I might wish for a little less Cotswoldian perfection here: an environment that looks a bit more lived-in, perhaps; a shade less of the old food-presentation punctiliousness. But I'm sure that will come once the neighbours discover quiz nights exist here alongside the own-cured hogget or meadowsweet madeleines. In Richard and Solanche's world, you're in the safest of hands. If ever those creatures burst through the upper crust in search of this common interloper, I reckon this would be as good a place as any to hole up. At the Royal Oak, the worst thing that can happen to you is sous-vide fish ■

Twitter: @MarinaOLoughlin; Instagram: @marinapoloughlin

A lot on her plate Three more things Marina ate last week



CHINESE MEDICINE

Juicy, restorative pork dumplings at Chang's Noodle in Holborn, central London.

The vivid, almost crunchy chilli oil beats chicken soup as a panacea for all lurgies



HOG THE LIMELIGHT

Pork belly with a kaleidoscope of perky, fresh things —

jerusalem artichoke, pear, barba di frate — at the lovely Salt in Stratford-upon-Avon, from the chef Paul Foster



TOP OF THE MORNING

A delicious surprise to find Paul Merrony and Tracey Petersen, the couple behind London's much-missed Gioconda Dining Room, at the Bower House in Shipston-on-Stour. Even breakfasts are special: Bayonne ham on pan con tomate with fried eggs Holstein. Inspired

TRENDING Flavoured butter

Grant Harrington is churning butter in rural Oxfordshire. "It's great there are so many bakers now, but butter is such an important staple," he shouts above the machinery.

In truth, his deep-yellow pats of cultured butter are anything but a "staple". They're entrusted to make that critical first impression at such tables as Raymond Blanc's Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons and Jason Atherton's Pollen Street Social.

Since founding Ampersand in 2014, Harrington has noticed a shift. It's not just restaurants that are upping their bread-basket game, but also home cooks, which explains the crowds at Maltby Street Market in London, where customers pick up a preordered "wheel" of Ampersand butter — made from Jersey milk and cultured to introduce a tangy acidity, before being kneaded, salted and then packaged — all by hand.

Meanwhile, since launching at Selfridges, Moose Maple Butter — made using Canadian maple syrup and Welsh butter — has been a hit. Farrah Boutia, the founder, began

CHURNING OUT IDEAS: FIVE TO TRY



Moose Maple Butter
Selfridges, £4.49/150g
moosemaple.co.uk



Black Truffle Butter
£6.95/100g
trufflehunter.co.uk



Abernethy Smoked Butter
£1.90/100g
abernethybuttercompany.com



Ampersand Cultured Butter
Maltby Street Market,
London SE1
£4.50/210g
butterculture.bigcartel.com



Artisan Bordier Seaweed Butter
£5.95/125g
finefoodspecialist.co.uk

making it at home as a healthy alternative to jams or spread. Since endorsements from Nigella Lawson and Nadiya Hussain, sales have doubled — as has her list of stockists.

The boom in flavoured butters is a trickle-down trend that started in top restaurants — chefs are now busy hay-smoking, folding beurre noisette or even whipping Marmite into their "house" butter to tantalise diners.

"The bread course sets the tone of the meal," says Adam Handling, chef at the Frog in London. His famed "chicken butter", served as a smooth quenelle and studded with crisp skin, is also available to take away, for £5.

There is also what Harrington calls "finishing butter", used as a seasoning: truffle butter over pasta, smoked butter with a plate of greens, cultured butter melted over a steak.

Or make your own. The Sportsman cookbook reveals the recipe for the signature dish at Stephen Harris's Kent pub: slip sole in seaweed butter. Hawksmoor: Restaurant & Recipes highlights beef butter, delicious with pan-fried scallops. Spread the news!

Rachel Walker