

THE ARBUTURIAN



The Surprise, Chelsea

BY ANNA SELBY ON JULY 4, 2023 LONDON RESTAURANTS

The Surprise in Chelsea certainly lives up to its name. Hidden down one of the borough's quietest (and arguably prettiest) streets, it feels a million miles away from the noise and bustle of the King's Road. Actually, it's just a few minutes' walk. Surrounded with gardens and playing fields, pretty cottages and the local church (even that has a gorgeous garden), it feels more like a village in the Cotswolds than central London.



It lives up to this bucolic atmosphere itself, with red-striped awnings, lots of greenery (not surprisingly, it's at its busiest during the Chelsea Flower Show), wooden benches outside and, inside, tongue and groove panelling and shelves full of leather-bound books and board games. Scarlet-clad Chelsea pensioners are often to be found in here – and it is their local, after all. In the past, when Chelsea had a more bohemian reputation, it was full of artists. There is even a rumour that its upstairs rooms housed a pet lion.

Charm, then, is not in short supply. The freehouse has been recently refurbished by landlord Jack Greenall to create an atmosphere that's cosy, relaxed and with just the right amount of quirky. He has overseen talks, music, miniature theatre, even a flamenco show. When all of that is not going on, though, most people come here for a quiet drink and, most notably, the food. This is modern British both in terms of style and ingredients, with a focus on fresh, local and seasonal wherever possible. There's a particularly interesting wine list (they partner with Bibendum) as well as "guest ales" and their own amber bitter, Surprise Ale.



The menu features nibbles to share (such as a charcuterie board or honey-glazed cocktail sausages) or not – who would want to share their half pint of prawns with lemon mayonnaise? The menu changes regularly to reflect the season but, when I was there, starters included a garden pea velouté with crème fraiche and pea shoots or beetroot-cured chalk stream trout with horseradish cream cheese. I chose the potted Cornish mackerel and brown shrimps with toasted sourdough – delicious and buttery – while the Major went for the chicken and mushroom terrine (he remarked particularly on the accompanying salad with its pickled carrots).

For my main course, I actually chose another starter, the smoked barbary duck breast with celeriac remoulade. I can't resist celeriac in any of its forms (an undeservedly neglected vegetable in my book) but as a remoulade, its particularly delicious and this one didn't disappoint. The Major chose the pan-fried Cornish cod which was super-fresh and delicately cooked, served with wild garlic pesto and samphire (perfectly al dente he assured me).



There are specials every day – one was a lobster Caesar salad which did sound interesting – as well as pub basics such as burgers and steaks. The puds come with their own extensive range of pudding wines and, to the Major’s delight, they had his all-time favourite dessert, Affogato – very simply, espresso and vanilla ice cream. There is a pretty extensive range, too, of liqueur coffees and a substantial cocktail menu. There’s a very pretty upstairs room (no lions in there now) with wonderfully leafy views for private parties.

Charming, relaxing and as close as you’re going to get in London to a breath of fresh country air.

The Surprise, 6 Christchurch Terrace, London SW3 4AJ. For more information, and for bookings, please visit www.thesurprise-chelsea.co.uk.