

British Culinary Surprises in Clark

Clark, the former US military base in Pampanga, has a new attraction that is bound to draw even more visitors to this peaceful, green haven. It's certainly worth the drive up the almost completely-renovated North Luzon Expressway just to sample fine cuisine at UK Chef Philip John Golding's latest venture – The Grill Room, part of the Hong Kong based “Yats International Wine Club”.

The concept for the club was first dreamed up by CEO, Denny Wang. A wine connoisseur, Denny has lovingly handpicked wines and champagnes from all over the globe to put together what is now regarded as the most exclusive wine cellar in Asia. It has a stock value of over US\$3 million and includes gems such as an 1849 vintage port and a 1900 Chateau Margaux priced at 1,620,800 pesos! Thankfully hundreds of more pocket-friendly vintages are also on offer.

Designed in a modern style featuring primary glass and wood, the restaurant itself provides a sleek backdrop for a special fine dining experience. Wanting to introduce the Filipino palate to range of peculiarly British ingredients which are rarely found on these shores, Chef Philip has come up with a menu which boasts an exciting range of freshly-imported ingredients such as quail, pigeon, brussel sprouts, celeriac, and parsnips.

Of course, having come all this way, we just had to sample the fare at this establishment. For our starter we selected a salad of fresh Baguio mixed leaves with smoked chicken and sweet seared scallops. The crisp leaves came with a dressing of virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, smoked almonds, and saffron. The sea bass that followed was cooked to perfection, almost translucent and beautifully moist, complemented by a rich and flavourful risotto made of rice, cooked al dente to give some bite to the dish! The pan-roasted wood pigeon lay on a fresh parsnip mash, with brussel sprouts, Serrano ham and a sublime port wine jus flavoured with sage and thyme. The pigeon was melt-in-your-mouth tender with a slight hint of that ‘gamey’ flavour that in no way overpowered the other ingredients. Philip said that he had experimented with this dish several times before adding it to his menu. He wanted to get the flavour right and ‘marry’ them without canceling them each other out, something he has achieved to perfection.

Just before we moved on to ordering dessert, Philip proudly showed off the Grill Room's luxurious facilities. Apart from the amazing wine cellars, there are several well-stocked private dining rooms. The state-of-the-art kitchen is manned by a large brigade of chefs who are not only busy working on menu preparation but bake fresh for the table as well.

Back at the table, dessert consisted of a plate of hot date and earl grey sticky toffee pudding served with home made caramel ice cream, a wild berry summer pudding served with clotted cream, and a lemon meringue cheesecake with a chocolate orange coulis. The sharpness of the citrus was delicious in tandem with the decadent sweetness of the chocolate orange.

Like a cigar after your meal? No problem! Chef Philip's cigar selection is beautifully stored in air tight, temperature controlled conditions. Seriously, no detail is overlooked at the Grill Room!

The evening was coming to an end but there was one more surprise in store in the form of a selection of delicious Cheeses imported especially by Philip, accompanied by a glass of port, a perfect way to round off a wonderful evening of gastronomic delights.

But Philip's ambitious plans for Pampanga do not end with the Grill Room. He is currently working with a number of potential partners set up a Culinary Arts School in the former Clark Polytechnic complex. He hopes to work with the British Council to ensure that his young students can train to global standards by gaining access to UK qualifications such as City and Guilds.