

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Matthew Norman

The only television chef of whom I've ever really approved is Kate Bridges of Eaton Place, the cook in the Edwardian fly-on-the-wall documentary series *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Although blessed with the usual fierce temper, particularly regarding the breakage of crockery by imbecile tweenie Ruby, what set Mrs Bridges apart from most of her myriad successors was her belief that the food, not the chef, was the star. The closest to centre-staging she ever came was the night she ascended to accept a golden sovereign from a guest (more a prototype signed photo than a tip, really, the guest being Edward VII) who wished to reward her for her baron of lamb. Otherwise, she kept herself to herself.

After her came Fanny Craddock, who clearly didn't, and Graham Ken (the *Gallop-ing Gourmet*), before the floodgates were opened in the 90s by the likes of Gary Rhodes, Rick Stein and Antony "But where are Snow White and the other six?" Worrall Thompson.

There are so many professional cooks on TV now that no one could possibly know them all, and one of whom I hadn't heard even after leaving the Pot Kiln in a quite staggeringly rural bit of Berkshire (if you go, and you absolutely should, I beg you to ring first for directions; I wouldn't wish on "Dr" John Reid what we went through on that moonless, rain-lashed night) is



The Pot Kiln 9/10

Telephone 01635 201366. **Address** Frilsham, nr Yattendon, Berkshire
Open All week, lunch 12-2pm (2.45pm Sun), dinner 7-9pm (closed Sun). **Price** Three courses with wine, £40-50. Bar meals also available

a certain Mike Robinson.

Exhaustive subsequent research reveals that Robinson has long been a regular on the BBC's *Saturday Kitchen* and had a hit show of his own, *Heaven's Kitchen*, on UKTV Food. So it is greatly to his credit that the ignorant visitor to what before he bought it was a nice, plain, old redbrick pub backing on to a small brewery in a quagmire somewhere near the M4, is assailed by no hint of his broadcasting career and no obtrusive piles of his book.

Apart from yet another calamitous journey (the patience

of his wife, who runs the front or house, during some 17 phone calls was astonishing; so here's to you, Mrs Robinson, for that), the evening's only irritant was a lengthy enforced wait in the bar before we were allowed into the adjoining room, which seemed odd given that only two other tables were taken. But the minute we were sat down beside a wood-burning stove in a gently lit dining room, its walls painted a warm terracotta and dotted with hunting-scene prints, things took an upward lurch with the arrival first of impeccable bread and then the sort of gutsy, unpretentious, locally sourced menu that makes you purr with anticipation.

All that followed, charmingly served by Mrs R and a couple of friendly young people, was superb. A warm salad of wood

pigeon came with amazingly good crispy bacon and black pudding, but was trumped by my friend's starter - a langoustine bisque of such perfect texture and such deep and lustrous flavour that I had to ask my friend to desist from the Meg Ryan, I'll-have-what-she's-having impersonation before he risked becoming Sloane Berkshire's first recipient of an Asbo.

The main courses were even better. A vast serving of juicy, roasted pheasant breast came with great bubble and squeak and wonderfully rich red-wine gravy dotted with bits of bacon and chestnut. But again my friend, backed the winner with five thick, tender, unbelievably flavoursome pieces of Sika deer with potato puree and a sensationally fine pepper sauce. "There should be a book written about that," he cooed dreamily on finishing it. "A trilogy, in fact."

We shared a glorious bread and butter pudding with homemade vanilla custard, finished coffee and glasses of a decent shiraz (the wine list isn't long but has been compiled with real passion and thought), and left agreeing that this was one of the best meals either of us had eaten in ages. And not once did the chef emerge from his kitchen, as TV cooks invariably do, to swan through his restaurant bathing his ego in the recognition (or, in our case, lack of it) and plaudits of his punters. Mrs Bridges would be proud of him.