

« THIS WAS THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY PIE I HAD EVER KNOWN: DEEPLY PORKY, FIRM AND INSISTENT IN ITS FLAVOUR »»



SAMPHIRE

As Sir Perceval felt in the moment when his tortured gaze finally fell upon the Holy Grail, so felt I last weekend – or as close as a food writer with an impure heart can feel to that immaculate sensation – when I found its savoury correlative: The Perfect Pork Pie. Not that that is much use to you as a recommendation, for having found it, I ate it.

I unearthed it, after all these years of questing – so many continents crossed, dragons slain, distressed damsels succoured, fiendish potentates prevailed over – at a small food shop called Samphire, newly opened in the grounds of Blickling Hall, a National Trust house in north Norfolk (very nice: late Tudor, crusty little red bricks, good chimneys, expertly pruned wisteria, lots of gravel, ghosts of horse-drawn carriages past, but no maze, disappointingly).

It was May 29, and on Samphire's small shelves there were big bunches of bright-green asparagus, narrow as pencils, plucked from the ground that morning, only yards away, and sipping water from a trough – their tips so young and sweet that later I ate the lot of them while waiting for the water to boil. There were English strawberries – pale-pink and honey-coloured, not red, as those year-round rotters from abroad always are. And so sweet, it was just silly. To eat an out-of-season polytunnel strawberry in lieu of one of these is like screwing a cabin-boy in a ginger wig because you miss your wife.

And there was an open fridge of rare-breed meat from which I plucked a four-pound boned shoulder of mutton for 13 quid – from a Norfolk Horn killed at two years and hung for a fortnight. You won't see that in any London foodstore, I'm afraid. Let alone in a small museum shop.



At the counter was a tray of sausages, warm and haphazardly chunked.

"They're Gloucester Old Spot," said the chap on the till.

I ate a handful while he tallied my mutton and fresh-grown things (though I had come to Blickling to look at the famous library, not for groceries), and then, as the pork-appreciating juices began to flow, I noticed a tray of pies being laid on the counter, 24 of them, in three rows of eight, steaming gently.

"Are the pies Old Spot, too?" I asked
 "They are indeed," he said. "These are Nell's famous pork pies. But they're just out of the oven, so they won't be set yet. If you want one, you'll need to eat it with a fork – £2.10 for the standard, or £2.40 for

the ones in the middle row with the onion marmalade in."

I broke the bank and went for marmalade. Breached the crust as he took my banknote. Smelt the deep, piggy aroma and fruity onion waft as he rummaged for change. Took a plastic forkful of salty, suety crust, with a chunk of the pink and grey meat and a gleaming slick of brown condiment, and forgot the coins I was due.

For this was quite the most extraordinary pie I had ever known: deeply porky without any nagging gaminess, spicy without being peppery, firm and insistent in its flavour and very lean, with just enough fat to lard the mouthful but not grease the palate. I hopped around and giggled and offered it to my friends, who dug in the >>

<< crusty tub and scoffed fat meaty mouthfuls dripping with gold and rolled their eyes and begged for more. Which is what led to my finishing the pie unsated and deciding to buy another one, and so to my eating the ultimate pie.

For when I returned to the till, my tongue still pulling slugs of meat and pastry from my back teeth with muscle-straining greediness, to buy a second pie, the fellow asked which one I wanted. And so I scanned the seven remaining onion marmalade middle-row pie princes and took the third from the left (I shall always remember it) because it had a black scar where the boiling marmalade had bubbled up through the aerating fork-holes and burned as it raced across the lid and trickled down the side.

This scar gave a carbonny edge to each mouthful, a jammy clack to each attempt to chew, a faint hint of rhubarb crumble, just a notion of dessert incorporated in the main. I ate this second, ultimate pie at a table on the lawn outside with a pint of Adnam's from the adjacent pub which (what with the sitting down) makes this paean to a single pie just about count as a restaurant review (Samphire also does picnics for walkers in the beautiful grounds: a pie and a slice of home-made cake and a bottle of fruit juice for £5.50).

And afterwards I spoke to Nell, whose pie it was. She used to be a banker. Gave up to come out here and rear rare pigs. Has six saddlebacks, six Tamworths, six Old Spots, and six Large Blacks. With her friend Karen, she opened Samphire a couple of weeks ago to sell only local produce (hence strawberries and asparagus and little else from the ground just now) and meat from pure rare breeds, raised outdoors in Norfolk. She has no special interest in organic registration, which is a useful tag for despairing Londoners but by no means the end of the responsible meat-eating story. Nell is more into high traceability and negligible "food miles".

The first two pigs she took to slaughter (accompanied them herself for all sorts of reasons to do with reduced trauma, better taste, and a prettier world) were Old Spots called Egg and Chips – in all the dreams of real meat I have fostered on these pages I never thought to eat named porkers. For my pie was made either from Egg or Chips – I didn't press her on which one, for she admitted that she had now given up naming the animals, because it made her melancholy ("Pah, hobby farmers!" the old guard will no doubt cry – but balls to 'em).

The first half pig she sent to the butcher (Roger, he's called) came back as 344 pies and in her first fortnight of trading

she sold 800. And that is one of the reasons, perhaps, that the pie was so good. For aside from the tenderloin (greedily kept back for her own consumption), Nell consigns the whole of every beast to pedom. Raised on pies of lard and bogey, flavoured on a good day with a little scrotum, I was flabbergasted by the tenderness and flavour.

And it is also how she can afford to raise the animals properly – 700 pies at an average of £2.25 a pie makes each pig worth about a grand and a half, as opposed to the tuppence-halfpenny a supermarket will pay for a pig, which is barely enough to lock it in a concrete-bottomed shed and feed it growth hormones and the entrails of its own family, though they do it anyway.

Speaking of which, on the way back into London the next day I spotted that bacon advert which boasts: "Less white stuff, less shrinkage" – Less? Less? So we are now to celebrate a brand that injects water and polyphosphates into its meat to increase product weight revenue, because they are doing it a bit less than before? Ye Gods, it's like a BNP election poster boasting: "A bit less racist, a bit less ugly".

A little further on, I saw one of those new Bird's Eye compound animal-protein slab adverts, now bearing the bandwagonastic slogan "no scary meat".

But that all depends on what you're scared of. ■

SAMPHIRE

The Estate Barn, Blickling Hall,
Norfolk (01263 734464)

Meat/Fish: 10

Cooking: 8

Other: 8

SCORE: 8.67

Buckinghamshire Arms

Blickling, Norfolk
(01263 732133)

This is the pub outside which I ate my pie. But it turns out that such behaviour is strictly prohibited by the landlord. Did you expect more from a provincial English pub? Either risk it, or buy your beer from Samphire and eat in the walled garden.

The Windmill

6-8 Mill Street, W1
(020-7491 8050)

Now touting itself as "The Institute of Pie Excellence" after the name I gave it in a review in 2002. If standards have been maintained the triple national champion steak and kidney is worth a detour.

E-mail feedme@thetimes.co.uk if you think you know a better pie