

## STUART KELLY

# 'DESSERTS ARE THE GOLD STANDARD OF RESTAURANTS, AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED'

PHOTOGRAPH JOHN PAUL

**W**HEN I became literary editor for this newspaper, I didn't think the job would involve travelling around the country as book festivals sprung up like mushrooms overnight. Such events have turned the solitary act of reading into something more communal, more mutual and occasionally more surprising. But it has also meant I've had to spend odd evenings in remote places wondering why chips have become my repast of choice. Scotland may have many virtues, but finding a restaurant on a Sunday evening isn't one of them.

And so it was we ended up in Nairn. My wife said she thought it was the most English Scottish town we'd been to, and the pavilion, the links and the chance of seeing Tilda Swinton seemed to back up her suspicion. It also, marvellously, had a restaurant open, so the nightly prow for Greggs and chippies wasn't necessary. The Classroom was preparing for a party - not their own, a guest's - and I'd have understood had they said they were too busy. But the staff were welcoming, obliging and tucked us into a table by the window, with copious comments giving their apologies that it might get noisier later.

Actually, it didn't get too raucous and the fact the kitchen managed to deal with the expected crush and the unexpected us is testament to the professionalism of the operation. They were also very gracious as we lingered over the menu. The lingering is another compliment to them, as the menu was a puzzle of sorts: almost every starter could be paired with any main course. That kind of elegance on a menu is rare.

I chose Cullen skink as a starter; not the most imaginative choice in some ways, but a kind of test. It was ideally "finished" with cream rather than clotted by it, and the potatoes and fish were chunky rather than pulverised. It was also, delightfully, light: Cullen skink can be made as a brothy gloop that would serve as a main course, but this was piquant and delicate.

Sam, almost by chance, chose the Classroom's best dish by far. It was a salad of asparagus, raspberries, smoked pheasant, rocket and pine nuts. It was the kind of combination that doesn't work in your head, but does on your



### TABLE SERVICE

#### The Classroom

1 Cawdor Street, Nairn (01667 455 999, [www.theclassroombistro.com](http://www.theclassroombistro.com))

Starters £3.25-£5.95

Mains £12.95-£19.95

Desserts £3.25-£5.95

#### Rating



tongue. Each mouthful was different. Sharp then earthy, fresh then meaty, it was a kind of chord of flavours.

My main course was medallions of beef with black pudding, with a Glayva sauce and a medley of roasted vegetables. Parsnip, turnip, swede and carrot were all allowed to reveal their sweetness without the sauce smothering their individual taste. The only regret I had was the black pudding. I adore this kind of blood sausage, and even tried to cook John Evelyn's 17th-century recipe once (it is very difficult to get blood these days). It was a tad too crumbly for my liking, but then I've never got over the taste of Ian Rout's black pudding from Melrose: since he's retired, I doubt I'll get that flavour again.

Sam had a piece of pork loin with, as she said, the cleverest accompaniment: a whole baked apple. It was fruit as vegetable, and didn't require the "Magner's cider" sauce. The pork and

the beef were cooked properly: my beef was tight and bleeding; Sam's pork was soft and unthreaty.

Replete from the main courses, we shared a pudding. The Classroom does a neat trick in having a "sharing pudding", a kind of chocolate tapas. The cookie was the least successful, but the mousse was just perfect. There was a "fridge pudding" that was matched by the gooey insides of the brownie. The chocolate main theme was underscored with different notes: a touch of pistachio here, a dribble of berry there.

Desserts are the gold standard of restaurants, as far as I'm concerned, since I can't cook them very well. After all, a restaurant is the place you go to have something you can't make at home.

The Classroom is not the only reason to go to Nairn, but it must be in the top two.