

# NORTH & SOUTH

July 2007

We venture out to eat with some trepidation these days. Too often we're disappointed by what restaurateurs offer up at top dollar when we enjoy excellent fare at home, much of it home-grown or freshly caught.

But dining out on Friday night after a big work week does have a special appeal: a chance to dress up and get out of our culinary comfort zone. In buoyant mood and with balmy temperatures belying our proximity to mid-winter, we head for Bushmere Arms, 10 minutes from Gisborne city on rolling farmland.

On entering the century-old weatherboard hotel — a once rundown pub lovingly restored by chef-cum-proprietor Robin Pierson — we're immediately at ease. There's a crackling wood fire in the grate and a friendly but not unctuous greeting from bar staff. The Arms still has a homeliness, redolent of its country pub days, but Pierson has dressed up the old girl; he's polished the fine rimu panelling and added stain-glass lampshades, a grand piano and a mix of New Zealand landscape paintings.

We decide to sit and toast for a while and nestle alongside other diners in front of the dancing flames enjoying our first tipple — a Millton Vineyard Chardonnay for me and a Montana Sauvignon Blanc for Mike. An intriguing design detail is an army of what must be several hundred whisky water jugs lining the shelves. In pink-cheeked pleasure we peruse the menu and vote to stick with Gisborne vino (which makes up a good third of the offering, with a good nod to the rest of New Zealand and running to the 1976 Chateau Lafite Rothschild at \$625 if you really want to get serious).

Wines by the glass are limited but at \$5 a glass you can't complain. The food pricing is also pleasingly simple: starters \$16, mains \$25. Find me better value.

With its sprawling and beautifully tended garden and large rooms, Bushmere is becoming a local favourite for weddings, birthdays and other "significant events". Plans are afoot to further extend the gardens, which provide the best in fresh clipped herbs and vegetables for the kitchen and even sweet smelling, tail-of-season roses for the tables.

Pierson, arguably the longest-serving chef in the district, knows his meat, having picked up New Zealand Beef and Lamb Hallmark of Excellence awards every year since the late 1990s.

A centrally situated kitchen separates the public bar from the main dining area; there's a hum of joyful banter from the bar-flies, and a party of 12 adjacent to our table, but the acoustics are good and lighting pleasantly subdued.

For starters I dither over the grilled black tiger prawns and porcini potato gnocchi with eggplant, but opt for seared South Island salmon, which is perfectly cooked, its sweet chilli tomato salad and avocado offering excellent foils to this rich farmed fish. Mike enjoys the mildly chargrilled flavours of the juicy lamb fillets with marinated tomatoes, matched with a glass of Brunton Road Merlot.

We're stumped over whether to go pinot or syrah? Helpful waitress Lisa suggests an unlisted Millton's 2005 Clos de Ste Anne

Syrah — no longer available for sale, but Bushmere still has a few bottles (\$60).

I've chosen my main, based on what I don't cook at home: the grilled venison with sautéed vegetables and pepper cognac jus. For Mike, it's the braised pork belly with noodles and wilted bok choy. The mains menu covers all ports including Bushmere's famous slow-roasted lamb shanks, a lemon thyme-marinated lamb loin, roasted fillet of beef, a chicken confit and fresh hapuku.

We're not disappointed with Lisa's recommended unlisted Millton syrah. The oaky nose is alluring, and the anisette, peppery tones perfectly complement the cinnamon and star anise flavours of the pork and the venison's succulent depth. Served in a large shallow bowl, the pork dish is exquisite. I secretly regret my choice but the venison is cooked to perfection, the jus richly flavoursome. Only the side servings of sautéed vegetables and salad (both \$3) merit some more imaginative attention from the chefs.

We retreat, replete, to the fireside where we can stretch out to savour the last of the syrah. It's getting late, the public bar is quiet, but Lisa piles another armload of wood on the glowing embers and we feel welcome to linger and contemplate dessert.

I'm thinking fresh autumn fruit dessert but the choice veers to wintery and somewhat uninspired classics: steamed pudding, sticky date roll, and Bailey's brulee. Mike orders the lightest of the bunch, banana crepes (\$9), and our waitress, knowing women too well, provides extra utensils. We share last tropics-tinged morsels slumped happily by the fire.

At \$178 including coffees, we've been warmly hosted — and Bushmere has more than confirmed its reputation for fine cooking of meat and fish. We bundle into the cooling night, mentally adding venison and pork belly to our do-try-this-at-home list.

