

Restaurant reviews

Lucy Bridgers tries out two excellent new local restaurants

York & Albany

To celebrate our anniversary early in November we tend to treat ourselves to a special meal out. This year was no exception. After a glass of fizz with my parents (very willing babysitters), Nathan and I headed down to Camden to the recently opened York & Albany, which is owned by Gordon Ramsay. You will probably have passed this old Regency pub on the C2 at the top of Parkway near the junction with Albany Street, right on the park. Sadly, this imposing Nash building has been standing empty for years and, at long last, it has been renovated and transformed into an upmarket bar, restaurant and deli.

Delighted to hear about its renaissance, I was really interested in going to the York & Albany. However, I have to admit that I'm not the greatest fan of Gordon Ramsay: although his smarter restaurants are very slickly run, they lack the touch of magic or alchemy that really excites me and I find his approach leans towards the safe and commercial. That said, Ramsay has some great people working for him and his standards are high. Jason Atherton at Maze and Angela Hartnett are exceptional chefs who cook with real flair, and it is the latter who oversees the kitchen at the York & Albany.

Anyway, on the wintry evening of our visit, we were struck by how elegant, warm and relaxed the place was and ordered a couple of cocktails at the bar from a varied and fairly priced list. As we were running a bit late, we moved through to the restaurant quite quickly and placed our order. The service was friendly, informative and efficient, and almost instantly a generous wooden platter of Italian meats and sausage appeared as an appetizer. To begin, Nathan ordered game 'mosaic' (terrine) with toasted sourdough and I went for the fried duck's egg with field mushrooms, Jerusalem artichoke and Parmesan. For the main course we settled on a shared roasted corn-fed chicken with bread sauce and seasonal root vegetables. The starters were excellent, particu-

larly my duck's egg, which was an inspired medley of autumn flavours with a generous drizzle of truffle oil. Our roast chicken was comforting and satisfying – simply prepared, allowing good, intense flavours to shine through. The menu as a whole was very tempting and offered lots of seasonal British ingredients, many prepared with a stylish Italian twist. The wine list has a reasonable selection of bottles under £30 and includes several wines available by the glass and 50cl carafes.

We thoroughly enjoyed our evening, finishing off our wine back in the bar in deep, comfy chairs and we were pleasantly surprised when our bill for the two courses (including wine and cocktails) came to less than £100.

I have since been back twice for drinks and been equally impressed (and reassured seeing Hartnett herself at the helm in the kitchen). The place is 'grown-up' and combines a sense of occasion with sleek, relaxed professionalism – in some ways more Manhattan than London, yet just two stops down the Northern Line. Highly recommended. 127–129 Parkway, NW1 7PS Tel 020 7388 3344; www.gordonramsay.com/yorkandalbany

500 Cinquecento*

This new restaurant opened in 2008 just down from Archway on the Holloway Road. The owners, chef Mario Magli and manager Giorgio Pili, met while working in Antonio Carluccio's Neal Street Restaurant and went on to work at Passione in Charlotte Street. Magli also had a spell at Jamie Oliver's 15.

At 8pm on a Tuesday the restaurant was almost full and buzzy. It is a simply decorated room that does get fairly noisy. The service is efficient and helpful and an assortment of superb home-made bread quickly arrived at the table. The menu spoils you for choice: there is a tempting selection of antipasti/appetisers, followed by pasta dishes in starter and main course sizes, delicious-sounding main courses and some 'specials'. We selected the Tagliere 500 from the specials, a

mixed platter of cured meats, cheese, pâté, assorted vegetables and a tiny pot of leek and potato soup. We also couldn't resist the sound of the deep-fried ravioli filled with provola cheese and mint (Raviolo ripieno di provola e menta) so we ordered what we expected to be one each and ended up with four per portion!

We were already feeling quite full when the main courses arrived. My friend's ravioli filled with duck served with a butter-and-cinnamon sauce (Ravioli ripieni di anatra con salsa di burro e cannella) was a beautiful dish: silky pasta encasing tender duck seasoned with a touch of orange, and the sauce was rich yet balanced. My gnocchi with braised leeks (Gnocchi di patate con porri) had a featherlight texture and the leeks had complex caramelized overtones. Very, very good!

Somehow we found space for puddings: Panna cotta with pistachios served with a strawberry sauce and Semifreddo al torrone (nougat ice cream) which was topped with crushed hazelnut and served with a chocolate sauce. The dessert menu also suggests a sweet wine to accompany each dish – also difficult to resist as the recommendations read so well.

A couple of points about the wines: there is an excellent selection by the glass starting at just over £2 and the main wine list offers a broad range of Italian wines with quite a few bottles under £20.

We were thoroughly impressed. The cooking is of a very high standard and 500 offers great value for money. Including wine and tip (service is not included), our meal came to just over £70 and could have been considerably less. A quick supper of some pasta and a spot of wine needn't come to any more than £15, but do try to spoil yourselves a bit more if it's your first visit – local restaurants don't come much better than this. Booking is essential. 782 Holloway Road, N19 3JH. Tel 020 7272 3406; www.500restaurant.co.uk
* Apparently, the name is inspired by the iconic tiny car by Fiat.