

If the label 'Gastro Pub' conjures up the taunting taste of pickled eggs Benedict on your palate, then be prepared to have your myth slain at the George and Dragon in the village of Speldhurst near Tunbridge Wells. Not a pickled egg in sight, but if there were then you could be sure that the eggs were organic, laid by local chickens, and delicately soured in a gentle balsamic vinegar with a sprig of fennel.

award winner

John Saunders

If you're a local bunny then run, rabbit, run because this is a kitchen that starts and ends each day teasing the flavour out of raw materials with the lowest number of food miles on the clock. Only the pepper and salt are served out of season. Otherwise it's strictly what's available this day from local farmers, foragers and the wily hunters who trapped an artisan cheese in a muslin cloth at dawn.

Once upon a time, so their story goes, owners Julian and Sarah Leefe-Griffiths were whiling away an idle moment savouring the local produce at a small village table near Urbino in northern Italy. Everything, poultry and game, cheese and sausage, originated within spitting distance. Only the table cloth came from Torino. You and I have done the same, no doubt, and then come home to eat green beans from Zimbabwe, flown in fresh daily via Manston airport, and succulent beef from Brazil, matured

for weeks on the high seas. They did something about it, stirred into action by the understanding that what grows together goes together.

Julian had long been an enthusiastic hunter and shooter and knew that the landscape of Kent and Sussex was rich in game, and farmhouse kitchen tables groaning with the flavours of home-made produce. He points to an apparent culinary contradiction. North London has a venerable tradition of gastro pubs – good modern pubs with excellent renewable food sources and an eye for seasonal quality. "But go to the average country pub, and all you can hear is the snip of scissors opening packets from the freezer, and the ping of the microwave, and you think, hang on, don't animals come from the countryside?" They took over the George and Dragon in 2004, and set about putting their vision on the table. This pub has no microwave, and all that's in the freezer is ice cream and a standby stock of bread, in case the

twice daily bake of fresh loaves runs out. It does have two conditioning rooms for maturing the meat that they buy in full carcase and butcher themselves. Head Chef Max Leonard, on the team from the start, can fashion a gourmet silk purse out of a sow's ear, and there's an eager queue of customers descending like wolves on the fold for occasional dishes featuring bits that never went to waste in olden times but never appear on supermarket shelves.

Julian sees the enterprise, at least in part, as a revivalist project, re-discovering techniques and tastes that faded with the memory of Eliza Acton, and the advent of chilled deliveries from the food factory. Putting back together the pieces of a broken and neglected tradition and making it work again. It seems to be an intensely rewarding creative challenge for a man who spent 20 years in the advertising business putting ideas together and making them work for the client.



Julian Leefe-Griffiths

Photos David King



Julian & team

It certainly works here, with the recent award of a Bib Gourmand by the Michelin Guide, and seasonal and organic produce winner on Alastair Sawday's Special Places list. To the collection of awards and accolades has just been added a listing in the Good Food Guide 2007.

You don't win awards by sitting around hoping, and Julian spends quality time visiting local suppliers, seeing the produce coming to harvest, and trying out new ideas for the George and Dragon menu. This is changed twice a day. Try the surprising smoked eel from the Weald Smokery at Frant, a crumbly, fine textured fish like mackerel but not so flaky, followed by slow roast belly of pork with caramelised apple, and then Stonegate cheddar from Sussex, or Norbury Blue cheese from Mickleham.

The George and Dragon has all the creaky character you could hope for in something with roots claimed deep into the local soil as far back as the 13th

century. It reminded me of home, except that the beer comes from Harveys of Lewes.

Elderly buildings are notoriously whimsical in the stories they tell you, and this one is Grade 2 listed as a late 15th. century hall house, with all the appropriate heavy beams and posts. I asked Julian to show me his queen post, to see if it was anything like mine (circa 1450), and there it was, bold as brass, at the centre of the magnificent dining room that spans the length of the first floor. As with any building of this age, there is bound to be something older buried beneath the foundations, like a smoked ham, or a flagon of Thuringian wine. The wine list is more up to date, with an eclectic selection of New and Old World, and a notable number of interesting Italians, reflecting the family's knowledge of all that's best in the country that really wears the culinary crown of Europe. Now there's a controversial statement, but we'll let that sleeping dragon lie, and let the George and Dragon speak for itself. ●

The George & Dragon
Speldhurst Hill, Speldhurst, Kent TN3 0WW. T: 01892 863125 www.speldhurst.com
OPEN: Mon-Fri Lunch 12.00-3.00. Dinner 6.00-11.00pm.
Sat 11.00-11.00pm (food lunch 12.00-3.00. Dinner 7.00-10.30).
Sun 12.00-1030pm (food 12.00-5.00)



Although this recipe looks complicated and lengthy it's really quite easy.

Venison

Ashdown Forest Venison T-bone steak with Braised Venison and Cep Suet Pudding.

Venison T-Bones

4 T-Bone cut Venison steaks - ask your butcher/game dealer to butcher the saddle of venison resulting in a delicious combination of fillet and loin with a small bone between them Maldon Salt and Cracked Black Pepper. Grill or Fry however you like your steak. After cooking let the steak to rest under foil for at 10mins. This will make for a juicier more tender steak.

Braised Venison and Cep Mushroom Pudding Filling

- 500g Shoulder of Venison (1" cubes)
- 200g diced Fresh Cep Mushroom (Chestnut Mushroom can be substituted)
- 1/2 bottle Red Wine or 500ml Local Ale
- 1L Homemade Brown Chicken stock
- 1 Onion (into 1/4s)
- 1 Large Carrots (peeled cut in 4)
- 1 stick of Celery
- 4 Cloves of Garlic
- A Bay Leaf, A Star Anise, 1 Teasp Tomato Puree, Sprig of Thyme, a pinch of Dried Chili, Butter and Olive Oil or Duck Fat

In a hot pan brown the venison cubes in duck fat. Remove and then fry Ceps for 3mins. Lower heat adding butter and sauté together for a further few minutes, remove and store. Sweat off vegetables in a saucepan (10mins roughly) then add spices and tomato puree. Fry for a couple of minutes and add the stock and alcohol reducing the liquid in the pan by about 2/3. The resulting broth should be tasty rather than watery. At this stage add the browned venison and very gently simmer covering the stew with a floating piece of parchment paper to keep the ingredients moist. Simmer slowly at a very low heat till the meat is soft (around 2 hrs sometimes longer). Allow to cool then strain. Then reduce the liquor until rich thick gravy is achieved. If you haven't used homemade chicken stock then add your

gravy thickener to get the desired consistency. Add cep mushrooms and only the venison pieces from the remains of the Braise, to the gravy, mix well and save for filling the pudding cases. The Braising Liquor can be further reduced to use as jus to dress the plates.

Pudding Pastry

- Atoxa Vegetarian Suet (your butcher if keen might provide you with suet from the Venison which you can grate in with a cheese grater)
- Self Raising Flour
- Sodium Bicarbonate
- Salt & Pepper
- Water

Sieve flour, Sod Bi-carb, and season in a mixing bowl. Gently mix in the suet mix in the water being mindful not to overwork the pudding dough. Wrap dough in cling film and refrigerate for till cold. Butter a dariole mould or ramekin 3 times, putting the moulds into the freezer for 10mins between each buttering (use a larger pudding bowl if preferred to individual puddings). Roll the dough out until it is about 1cm thick. Cut out two disks using the open end of the mould. Place one in the bottom of the mould (the other will provide the top. Cut Strips 1cm longer than the height of the moulds and cut to fit into the moulds using fingers to press the dough to form the sides of the pudding casings. Fill the puddings 1/2 of the way up with braised venison and mushroom, top up with braising liquor (warm liquor up if the filling has been left in the fridge before pouring) leaving enough space to mould on the lid. Pierce with a fork a few times and steam for 1 1/2 hrs+ (longer if the pudding is a large one).

Serve with a tart sharp fruit compot. ●