

LEAVE ROOM FOR CAKE

Frances Hopewell-Smith heads to Earsham Street Cafe in Bungay for breakfast...and lunch...oh, and tea

IT'S not often I'm tempted out for a day trip on a Saturday, it always seems a bit daring and somehow naughty to spend time idling when there are chores to be done. But an outing to Bungay - how could I resist? Especially when the destination is the Earsham Street Café. I've been here before and this time my aim is to eat breakfast and lunch, not a predictable brunch, but as two separate elements. Best take a friend to share the load.

Arriving a bit ahead of our booking we dawdle along Earsham Street and marvel at the shops. Look, a greengrocer's! And a fishmonger! An art shop! A deli! Baskets! I've almost run out of exclamation marks! And so to the cafe before punctuation overload.

The place is crammed and our table is by a window. Although small, this isn't a twee country cafe. No gingham tablecloths or wheelback chairs here. It's bright and light, decorated in pale colours and white, with plain white wood tables and a wooden floor. The rooms are dotted with upright beams and the vibe is friendly and lively.

Gemma Parker, the owner, is a treasure and Bungay is indeed lucky to have her. Brought

up in a household where her mother, a professional cook, was always in the kitchen, and has been Gemma's inspiration for as long as she can remember, it was a given that Gemma chose food as her career. She was working in a restaurant when a competition win made a monumental change. Her prize was a course at the world famous Leith's school where she met and was inspired by chefs Fergus Henderson and Yottam Ottolenghi. No surprise then that the specials on the cafe boards are a million miles away from the trad British standards and feature a dazzling array of ingredients. We're desperate to try, well anything really, but settle on American style pancakes

and then a starter and two main courses. We push the boat out with a glass of local apple juice for me and my friend goes straight for cider, Aspall of course.

I have to confess a penchant for pancakes with maple syrup and crispy bacon. Earsham Street's come with the syrup and banana but, what no bacon? It arrives in a flash. I'm in heaven, but share a little with my friend. Well that's all gone and on to the next, which is smoked mackerel pate with home made carrot chutney, not something I would have chosen as a rule, but the waitress, Lynsey, recommends it and that's good enough for me. It is a light, fresh blend of flavours, seasoned with parsley and horseradish, the granary bread is crunchy and squashy. Even the salad is a bunch of leaves fresh from the garden, not the mix-in-a-bag variety. The main courses are chicken curry (friend) and pan fried pork fillet (me). And you can tell Gemma has had her way with them, tweaking the composition to be intricate and inventive. The curry is aromatic and flavoursome showing a real understanding of the provenance. My pork fillet is just deliciously tender and the sauce, creamy but not rich. It's served with crushed potatoes and a little dish of vegetables. I can't quite believe I'm in a café in Bungay having food like this, it's gorgeous. All around me lunchers are obviously thanking their lucky stars too and now there's a queue forming by the front door. The staff negotiate their way round the tables like ballet dancers, looking after the food orders and selling cakes from the front of the café too.



below left

Gemma Parker and Mike Hennessy of Earsham Street Cafe in Bungay.



“Her coffee is fairtrade and rainforest alliance, her tea is ethically traded. This is someone who cares about what she cooks and where it comes from”



right
Turkey a stuffing
pie with Sweet
Potato Wedges

Gemma takes a quick break from the kitchen and we do speed talking. She and husband Mike have been running the café for three and a half years. They open seven days a week and occasionally in the evening; the evening events are sold out almost as soon as they're announced but Gemma hates to disappoint her regulars so plans more. She had a cake company before the café, still makes cakes for the shop and the scones come from her kitchen too, fresh every day. Her mother makes all the jam and chutney for them.

She is very unassuming and modest but with high standards and values. When she talks about local and seasonal she means it. The majority of her vegetables are grown by a smallholder nearby who digs and delivers on the same morning. Meat is free range, chickens come from Sutton Hoo, eggs from Halesworth and bread from the bakery across the square. Gemma plans her menus around this produce. Her coffee is fairtrade and rainforest alliance, her tea is ethically traded. This is someone

who cares about what she cooks and where it comes from. Then she casually mentions the community kitchen she started five years ago with a friend, feeding 50 or so people once a month, two courses for six pounds. She's handing that on now, but not before compiling a recipe book of dishes from her time at the community kitchen.



I'm very impressed by all this and ask Gemma if she has any awards and she begins to grin. 'We've been voted best café for cyclists in Suffolk and Norfolk,' she says, 'and we have groups of about ten or 20 at a time. They put their bikes in the rack outside in the courtyard, have something to eat and drink there and then after about half an hour they're gone.'

Time to go for us too, but we can't resist buying some cake on the way out - one piece of carrot and one of sultana and almond - to have at tea time. They don't make it past the car. ♦

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