

THE FULL ITALIAN JOB

RESTAURANT REVIEW AMANDA WRAGG AT THE ALMA INN, COTTONSTONES. PICTURES BY BRUCE ROLLINSON

HERE'S something life-extending about having one's expectations confounded, just when you think you've got the measure of something, you get put on the back foot.

A pretty ordinary pub in Calderdale does just that. What makes it stand out from the crowd? An innovative Italian/Yorkshire alliance.

The first time I went to the Alma, I had my assumptions challenged (in a good way) and it continues to surprise me. You think you're about to have one sort of experience, and you have another.

Handsome and stone built, the Alma stands solidly on the hillside overlooking the lush Ribblesdale Valley, caught between

Soyland and Sowerby on an intricate network of narrow lanes that characterise this part of Calderdale.

It was a random old boozier when Dave and Glen Giffen bought it in 1987, and they've been tweaking ever since. A kitchen and dining room have been built, en suite bedrooms have been added and a fabulous huge stone patio at the side affords astounding views across the moors to the fenny hills beyond. Head out here on a hot day for some al fresco fun – it's the best pub garden in Yorkshire in my view.

Inside, flagged floors, beams, exposed walls and a waggly-tailed dog with one brown eye one blue who wanders from one fire to the next.

Tim Taylor has quite a presence here, with three beers, one of which is the estimable Golden Best. But if you're embracing being European, there are over sixty Belgian beers, with a range of flavours that will take you from berries to bark and back again.

Dave and Glen have an old-school notion of hospitality running through them like a stick of seaside rock: it's what they do, they're here seven days a week, month in month out.

You're treated like a friend, they remember little personal details despite not having clapped eyes on you for a year. I watch Dave work the room;

there's no-one he doesn't talk to.

On a chilly winter night, there are families, a couple of groups of youngsters, a gang of girls all got up of a Sunday and farmer types propping up the bar. Everyone is welcomed as they arrive and thanked as they leave. Rare. Catch it while you still can.

But to the Italian link. There's Jozef, the smiling Milanese Maitre d' (I know! In the middle of nowhere near Halifax) whom you might have clapped eyes on at the Flying Pizza in Leeds, and there's a genuine wood-fired pizza oven



There's a smiling Milanese maitre d'. And a wood-fired pizza oven which produces thin crust beauties.

which produces thin crust beauties. The Alma is known locally as the Pizza Pub, and tonight quite a few are being spat out of the flames, including a steady succession of take-outs. Wish I lived nearer, I would take the notion of a loyalty card to new heights.

A short-ish menu (always a good thing) includes several straightforward pasta dishes, including tagliatelle with grilled chicken, sun blushed tomato and red pesto, and spaghetti with tiger prawns, chilli & spinach leaves plus one or two pub staples – all made in house, with ingredients sourced locally.

We choose from here and the specials blackboard. The return of the prawn cocktail is most welcome, arriving in a big lettuce leaf, and is pronounced delicious. And this from a woman who's eaten a few on account of the fact that she was there when they were invented.

Chicken breast wrapped in Parma ham proves to be tender, tasty, moist and very neatly presented with crushed new



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UNEXPECTED: The Alma Inn, a traditional Calderdale pub, is becoming as renowned for its pizzas as its beer.

potatoes and al dente mange tout. My sticky ribs fall off the bone to be dipped into a good tomato sauce freighted with fennel.

But the star of the show is the pizza, naturally. It's got to be The Meat Feast; pepperoni, salami and parma ham, on a soft and pliable base reminiscent of the pizzas you buy from the street stalls in Naples – perfect.

Of course I can't finish it and Jozef suggests a box to take it home in. So I end up with a take-out anyway.

No room for puds, but just so you know they're along the lines of tiramisu and apple and raisin crumble. A bottle of nicely chilled Mezzacorona Pinot Grigio is £12.95, and tap water arrives in an instant.

So take your pick; come and sit in front of the fire with a pint, the paper and a sarnie, or go for the full Italian job. It's the latter for me; the incongruity is delicious.

■ The Alma Inn, Cottonstones, Sowerby Bridge, West Yorks, HX6 4NS 01422 823334. www.almainn.com Open seven days a week, noon – midnight. Meal for two (two courses) £44.85 including a bottle of wine at £12.95.



WELCOMING: A starter of Bresaola with rocket and parmesan shavings at the Alma Inn, Cottonstones, which fuses Yorkshire hospitality with an authentically Italian menu.