

Est is best

Dave Smith drops wholeheartedly into  
Martinborough's Est Restaurant & Bar and  
discovers the culinary riches of country life  
Photos by Frank Warner

It takes a certain amount of self confidence to set up a restaurant in the Wairarapa and call it Est - especially when it is sited in what used to be the durable old Martinborough post office, the less abstruse name used by the somewhat more earnest preceding eating establishment, But that is precisely what chef Jeremy (by way of London and Ponsonby) and partner Natasha have done, it is an indicator of their entire approach to restaurant style, Put briefly, Est is the Latin tag for "it is" and harks back to the German folklore tale of a bishop who, enroute to Rome, sent out scouts to locate those inns with the best wine,

They were to chalk the word "est" on the outside of the better watering holes, At Montefiascone, the scout chalked the word there in triplicate, When the bishop called in, he forthwith decided to give Rome a miss and set up shop drinking the thrice-lauded wine till he popped his clogs, Nice story.

Ironically, the night we dined at Est we were in a bit of rush to get moving no matter how many Est signs there were on the outside wall, Our gracious hosts took that as no sort of slight and quickly set to, installing us on a copious couch before a roaring fire, The rest went like clockwork.

So there we both were, knocking back some good cream sherry, when our no-nonsense but discreet first waitress rolled up to take the food and wine order. We were enjoined to have our entrees right where we sat if we wanted. Nope, we would do the whole thing at the nearby corner table where the heat of the fire would reach our backs and where conversation could take place in snug intimacy.

With every visit to the table, a new item of piping hot food would arrive with a pertinent comment to help us along. The courses moved effortlessly into each other.

My soup of the day was parsnip and apple. It defined the word subtle. Had I been blindfolded and asked what the soup was, I would have put my hand up for parsnip, but there was clearly something else in there and after several spoonfuls the penny finally dropped.

For mains, I clipped my medical card that allows me five fillet steaks a year and was extra glad I did. It was the freshest, hunkiest and tastiest fillet I've had in many a long year - none of that "same old, same old" that haunts Steakland. It was glazed with a goat's cheese fondant served on wilted spinach atop pomme anna: a food island in a suitably generous hot red wine jus lake.

The vegetables more than salved my conscience about ordering the meat, and I added rosemary and thyme, roasted potatoes, which, in turn, bore that hallmark offreshness and vitality running through the whole meal. There are some real benefits in eating out in the country.

The quality of the meat, vegetables and fruit seem to be just one of them. Across the table, a concoction of chickpea, chili, feta and garlic salad with sauted baby vegetable in puffed pastry cases, mushroom and tarragon sauce with turned potatoes met with impressed approval. Eschewing the "all bells and whistles" of steak and sauces, my wife mentioned with appreciation the originality of the dish.

In the wine stakes we were beautifully catered for with glasses of Walnut Ridge pinot noir 2004 and a Stone Cutter pinot gris. These are both Martinborough wines (the first being from Ata Rangi), but we noticed that the wine list was full, but not flashily over-full, of wines from all major New Zealand regions. Est exudes an air of both confidence and good sense rooted in solid Kiwi values; right down to making Veuve Clicquot available to passing punters, but in small single bottles that fit nicely with average purses.

No attempt is made to bowl us over with what for many would be unaffainable excess.

By dessert time we were as mellow as time constraints would allow and certainly well lubricated/fortified for the later evening events. We took extra time, though, to luxuriate our way through two top-notch "alters". Mine was a brioche bread and butter pudding infused with calvados and rum with a clever trio of sauces. Again, the central integrity of the product shone beaconlike, hot and with a firm consistency, out of which the total dish seemed somehow to gently unfold on the plate. The Affagato ice cream with espresso and Drambuie was another example of this. Reviewers struggle to impart in mere words to a non-eating reader the joy of sampling a special dish. All we can say is, go and try these for yourself.

Est is a finely conceived restaurant that knows what it wants to achieve without aiming to create an overblown fine dining outpost in our rural heartland. For the traveller or resident in the Wairarapa it can deliver urbane wit, style, unimpeachable quality and down-to-earth food satisfaction light years beyond mere comfort food - all in welcoming yet intimate surroundings. That is quite an achievement and one that is the result of smart thinking plus the grinding hard work that lies behind anything that looks "effortless". And that older guy over by the window eating by himself? He certainly looked like a bishop to me.