

31 March 2007

## **EATING OUT: It'll float your boat**

With fantastic traditional dishes, top service courtesy of the 'wee wummin', and fantastic prices, what's not to like about this inn? THE SHIP INN 120 - 122 HARBOUR STREET, IRVINE

**BY TAM COWAN**

After getting knocked out of Europe by AC Milan a few weeks back, Celtic boss Gordon Strachan was quick to praise his team.

"If there was a Champions League for sheer guts," he said, "we'd win it."

Well, by the same token, if there was a Hot Plate Award for service and customer care, I reckon The Ship Inn would be picking up our next gong.

I thought my mother-in-law knew a thing or two about keeping everybody happy when it comes to food and drink.

Yep, if Elsie had been running the show at the feeding of the 5000 (and she only missed it by about 35 years) I guarantee there would have been a Blue Riband or chocolate Hob Nob for everyone who finished their fish sandwich. (Presumably that's what JC rustled up with the five loaves and two fishes, yeah?)

But the wee wummin at The Ship Inn (and I can think of no better description than "the wee wummin"), really was something else.

From the moment I overheard her offering a move to a bigger table for a party of six - even though they seemed quite happy where they were seated - I knew this was someone more than willing to go beyond the call of duty.

At our table, for example, my wife's Uncle Joe (who hadn't ordered a dessert) was presented with a spoon - just in case he wanted to try a bit of ours!

And after he asked for his tea to be strong, the wee wummin said: "Nae bother, I'll just put three teabags in the pot." Her main concern, however, was simply making sure everyone had a right good feed. "We don't do chips at The Ship Inn," she said. "But nobody leaves here hungry."

That was her line as she filled our table with huge bowls of potatoes, vegetables and peas to accompany our hefty main courses. "And remember," she added, "if you want anymore veg, just give me a shout."

But even Monty Python's classic creation Mr Creosote would have politely declined the offer...

We're down at Irvine harbour, by the way, just next to the Magnum Centre.

Built way back in 1567 (the year Mary Queen of Scots abdicated and was immediately consoled with tea and biscuits courtesy of my mother-in-law). The Ship Inn looks very homely outside and, sure enough, there's a snug, toasty feel the minute you enter.

It was absolutely heaving on a bitterly cold Tuesday night, but that's hardly surprising when I tell you a first-class feed for the five of us (plus wine and drinks) cost just £75!

The food is wonderful and the menu jam-packed with family favourites.

Starters include haggis, neeps and tatties, Stornoway black pudding with onion gravy and marinated herrings.

Main courses feature lamb shanks, roast leg of lamb and steak mince with doughballs. Desserts? Hands up who doesn't like the sound of banana splits and hot chocolate fudgecake?

Our starters were excellent. No complaints about the prawn cocktail or the poached mushrooms in a white wine and garlic sauce and all three soups of the day were excellent.

Moving onto the main courses you won't find a dish dearer than £7.75.

The braised steak and the salmon/prawn combo received the thumbs up and we even managed to please my father-in-law (aka Mr Fussy) with a real old-fashioned treat - lamb's liver served with pork sausages.

The shepherds pie was way too much for Liz and I also struggled with my steak pie. Well, not quite. "Would you like a gap for dessert?" asked the wee wummin. "Yes," I replied. "We'll come back next Friday."

Nah, it only took about ten minutes before we were unable to resist piping hot apple crumble with custard, syrup sponge with cinnamon custard and a bowl of superior sticky toffee pudding.

Okay, we probably didn't need dessert. But when you're eating at a place called The Ship Inn, surely it's only appropriate to push the boat out?

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TAM'S HOT PLATE CONTENDERS

THE SHIP INN

Address: 120 - 122 Harbour Street, Irvine

Tel: 01294 279722

Open: All day seven days for food and drink

Wheelchair access: Yes

Bill for five (with wine): £75

Food: 5/5 - terrific traditional favourites

Service: 5/5 - three cheers for the wee wummin

Decor: 4/5 - loved the nautical bric-a-brac

Toilets: 4/5 - very clean

Value: 5/5 - an absolute bargain

Total: 23/25.

24/25 The Jefferson Restaurant, Grange St, Kilmarnock. 01563 526265

23/25 Voujon, 107 Newington Rd, Edinburgh. Tel: 0131 667 5046

22/25 The Grill @ Dakota Eurocentral, Shawfoot Road, Motherwell. Tel: 0870 2208281

22/25 Mother India's Cellar, 28 Westminster Terrace, Glasgow. Tel: 0141 221 1663

22/25 Harlem, Central Esplanade, Kirkcaldy. Tel: 01592 264496

22/25 Dubh Prais, 123b High St, Edinburgh. Tel: 0131 557 5732

22/25 Malmaison, 278 West George St, Glasgow. Tel: 0141 572 1000

22/25 Le Monde, 16 George St, Edinburgh. Tel: 0131 270 3900

22/25 Valentino, 4 Barrack St, Hmailton. Tel: 01698 284379

21/25 Dino's, 35 Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow. Tel: 0141 332 0626

21/25 Wheelhouse, Millennium Wheel Dr, Falkirk. Tel: 01324 673490

21/25 Spotlight's Brasserie, 8 North Port, Perth. Tel: 01738 563032

The current Hot Plate winner is Catch 22, 158 Bath Street, Glasgow. 0141 331 6222

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