

# Annan other thing

**Extract from:** Scotland On Sunday

**Published Date:** 01 June 2008

By RICHARD BATH

..... I found myself back in this little market town less than ten miles from the border with England, this time to do some eating. I was there to review a restaurant that is, I was reliably informed, changing local residents' habits. No longer do they have to catch the train to Carlisle or drive to Moffat for a decent meal. In fact, people from as far afield as Carlisle, Moffat and Dumfries are now making the reverse journey.

I wasn't sure what to make of the name, though: somehow Del Amitri just doesn't really inspire. Weegie warbler Justin Currie coined the name for his band because of "its utter meaninglessness", and the reaction of the two friends who knew I was about to visit was to ask why I fancied visiting a pizza and pasta joint in down-at-heel Annan.

For the record, Del Amitri is many things: it is sited on the very spot where Robert Burns wrote 'The Deil's Awa Wi' Th' Exciseman', above the town's finest chippy which doubles as the favourite haunt of actress Ashley Jensen, the local girl of Ugly Betty and Extras fame. But despite occupying the first-floor space until recently filled by Pagani's trattoria, it is most definitely not an Italian restaurant.

The interior – all stripped wooden floors, leather chairs and brown walls with ancient black-and-white photos of the town in Victorian times – is smart enough to constitute a definite statement of intent, but it's only when you see the menu that you know for sure this is something out of the ordinary.

Such is proprietor-chef Martin Avey's dedication to using only fresh local produce that he changes the menu every week. This is one restaurateur Gordon Ramsay wouldn't think of clapping in irons. Avey's wife, Lisa, a cheery six-foot blonde, runs the front of house and proves intensely knowledgeable about the food on offer.

Our starters soon arrived and hinted at a commendable attention to detail. Fiona's Greek salad was as nice as a combination of green leaves and feta cheese can be, but Les's smoked mackerel served on a salad of potato and wild watercress with a cockle-and-mussel salsa was a tremendous fusion of ingredients sourced locally and topped with a slab of silvery fish that reminds you just how incredibly good freshly caught mackerel can be.

My pressed terrine of confit rabbit layered with savoy cabbage and encased in Parma ham, with a vinaigrette featuring tea, sherry, leek and prune, was in its own way even more impressive. The subtle flavours of the moist rabbit went well with the Parma ham, but it was the remarkably nuanced and layered vinaigrette, a mix so complex it would have taken the boffins of Bletchley Park to decode it, that really set the dish apart.

If our main courses were marginally less ambitious, they were equally successful. Les's pan-fried guinea fowl supreme served with fettuccine, broad beans, petits pois, baby onions and a light truffle sauce was solid enough, and Fiona's chicken fricassee with mushrooms, pancetta, thyme, white wine and cream was a sophisticated take on the dish beloved of students everywhere. My incredibly tender pan-roast smoked mallard breast with a haricot bean purée, rissole potatoes and griottine cherry jus was a triumph on every level.

Les rounded off with an impressive baked sherry and toasted hazelnut cheesecake which came with a glass of dark brown vintage Pedro Ximenez sherry that would have been worth the journey on its own. Fiona's impressive mango and crème fraîche mousse with a passion-fruit glaze was the highlight of her meal.

I opted for the warm ginger sponge with treacle sauce largely because it was accompanied by cherry ice-cream, for which I'm a complete sucker. If the ice-cream was unremarkable (connoisseurs should try the peerless version sold at the Drumlanrig Café up the road in Thornhill), the light sponge absolutely packed with ginger more than atoned.

The quality of the ice-cream was a minor quibble, however. The standard of the food at Del Amitri was good, creeping up to outstanding at times, and all at a significantly lower price than you'd pay in the central belt. I even quite liked Annan.

## **VITAL STATISTICS**

### ***Del Amitri***

*95 High Street, Annan (01461 201999)*

*Out of pocket*

*Starters £4.40–£4.95; mains £12.40–£14.10; puddings £4.70–£4.95 (cheese £5.10)*

*Rating 7.5/10*