



The royal treatment

PLEASANT HOUSE PUB TAKES PILSEN WITH PIES, BEER AND A TRIPPY BATHROOM

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Outside of Fergus “Bone Marrow” Henderson, Jamie “Naked Chef” Oliver and Gordon “Hell’s Kitchen” Ramsay, the English aren’t usually lauded for their food. They are, however, celebrated for their soccer, aka football. These facts tend to manifest themselves here in Chicago in that most places where you can catch a Premier League or World Cup game look like questionable basement man caves and serve middling pub food. But the tide is turning with Chelsea and Art Jackson’s recent reincarnation of their long-running but now-defunct Bridgeport bakery, Pleasant House, as Pleasant House Pub in Pilsen.

The experience

The former dark and shadowy Nightwood space has been brightened up with a coat of cheerful white paint. Hand-lettered signage hawking “real breads” and “real ales” hangs over the columned facade, and a dark atrium-like annex abuts the whitewashed brick. From the outside, Pleasant House Pub looks like a set piece from an English film where a bunch of blokes who have recently lost their jobs at the mill get soused on lager while crafting some kind of scheme in order to pull

birds and avoid the dole.

Inside, shiny gold draft pumps line the coffee-colored bar top and marble tables fill out the front room swaddled in lacy curtains. The annex is filled with industrial metal and wood picnic-style tables. Silverware and napkins are stuffed into ceramic steins a viking might drink from. Oh, and the bathrooms are outfitted with gold trim and fixtures, jet-black toilets and trippy wallpaper. It sounds weird, but the effect was so mesmerizing that I kind of wanted to hang



Mushroom and kale royal pie

out in the loo longer than I should have. But what about the soccer, you say? Well, there are a couple wood-trimmed mirrors behind the bar that hide TVs, which will be used to show matches, co-owner and co-chef Art Jackson told me.

The drinks

The beer list is fantastic and includes selections from modern taps as well as a few traditional old timey English-style beer engines. Chicago brewery Forbidden Root's Money on My Mind gin and juice-inspired wit-bier (\$7) shines with juniper and grapefruit perfume. As does Allagash's Little Brett (\$7), which tastes like funky, fizzy champagne. On the cocktail front, I enjoyed a sherry cobbler (\$9) featuring sherry, mezcal and pineapple syrup that tasted like a smoky pineapple margarita. There's a Pimm's Cup (\$9) on offer as well, but the refreshing citrus and sweetness I usually associate with the summery drink was overwhelmed by bitterness from Cynar and gin.

The food

The Jacksons' famous royal pies are back in the spotlight with their flaky, golden, double-walled, all-butter shortcrust pastry

And while hearty steak and ale and chicken balti flavors are excellent, the mushroom and kale pie (all \$8.50 each) gets my vote as the ultimate crack rock-like addictive pastry. The creamy innards are stuffed with oyster and shiitake mushrooms and kale, resulting in a deeply savory dish. At the new location, you can opt to have your pie "crowned" with a scoop of mashed potatoes and gravy. I refrained so I could focus on the flavors, but next time I'm off the clock, I'm totally going to soak my pie in carb comfort.

Not all the pies are traditional British flavors. When I visited, the weekend special was filled with Asian barbecue pork and topped with ginger-maple slaw (\$8.50), a tasty mashup of a potpie and pork bun. "We'll pretty much stuff anything up in a pie," Art Jackson said. "We like to do flavors around holidays or events like the Olympics."

All this talk about gravy-covered meat and potatoes might have you hankering for something lighter. The Royal Chef's salad (\$11) provided a nice contrast with baby kale, shaved Brussels sprouts, pungent chunks of Stilton cheese, walnuts, barley and apples

tossed in a tomato-cumin vinaigrette. The nuts, apples and barley gave the salad enough heft to hold its own.

Of course, if you want to stay in the comfort-food zone, thick golden chips (aka fries, \$2.50 a la carte) with a side of curry sauce (50 cents) for dipping are a great choice. The Jacksons' vegan curry is a puree of roasted vegetables spiced with garam masala, garlic, ginger and onion and spiked with lemon zest and juice. The end result is so silky that you'll want to guzzle it straight. You can also order fish with those chips (\$13) on Fridays. Unfortunately, thin planks of Lake Superior white fish aren't as forgiving as thick cod steaks. And while the beer batter crust was airy, the fish inside was a little over-fried and dry.

The dessert

An order of sticky toffee pudding (\$5) featured moist-to-the-core date cake drizzled with thick toffee sauce. My only issue here was that I wanted a moat of toffee sauce rather than a scant drizzle. A trifle (\$5) overflowing with custard, whipped cream, moist cake and peaches was decent, though

I'd hoped for chin-dripping perfect peach flavor and got only a slight whiff of peach and mostly flabby, chewy fruit.

Unimpeachable, however, were the lacy crisp cookies (\$2.50) studded with oatmeal and dark chocolate chips. They were like a mashup of oatmeal, chocolate chip cookies and a crispy potato chip.

The service

The wait between ordering and receiving our food was pretty long, something our server noted and apologized for twice before anything arrived. Instead of courting things out, most of the items arrived at once, forcing us to chow down fast to make room for all the plates we ordered.

Bottom line

The kitchen needs to work on executing the menu more consistently, but the beer list is bangin', the royal pies are flaky and the place is lovely. I can also say with certainty that Pleasant House Pub is the best place to grab a bite to eat while watching a soccer game in Chicago this fall.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

MINI-REVIEW
Pleasant House Pub
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 ★★☆☆☆
 Take it or leave it