

FOOD REVIEW:

'The Botanist in Ipswich lives up to the hype'

The latest gem in Ipswich's dining crown certainly shines, says Danielle Lett

Last week I finally got around to checking out the current talk of the town - The Botanist.

For the past few months, Ipswich has been abuzz with murmurings about when this new restaurant and bar (part of an upmarket nationwide chain) would finally open, and I was really excited to experience what it had to offer.

Thankfully, The Botanist finally threw its doors open at the beginning of the month - and it's already been a massive hit. I've heard so many people talk about it, saying it's definitely top of their list for their next foodie night out.

The bookings speak for themselves. I couldn't get a table for the next few weekends. So 8pm on a Tuesday it was then.

As my mum and I headed inside, we both marvelled at what



ABOVE:
A lamb kofta hanging kebab

BELOW AND MAIN:
Inside The Botanist

Pictures: DANIELLE LETT/SARAH LUCY BROWN

they'd done to the place. Anyone who's ever been to Ipswich knows how much of an iconic building the former post office is.

It sits on the Cornhill, in the centre of town, and dates back to the late 19th century. Grade II-listed, it survived two world wars before it shut its doors in 2015.

So to see it in use once again was great - and the décor is really tasteful, to say the least.

Think freshly-painted white walls, adorned with ceiling-high murals of plants and leaves. Low-hanging, warm lights are dotted throughout, and framed leaves and pressed flowers are scattered across the walls. A number of tall, towering fake trees really make you feel like you're in a secret garden speakeasy. The place exudes luxe, and I was excited to see if the food and drinks followed suit.

As you walk in, the bar is straight ahead. Fully stocked with bottles galore, we knew we'd have to order a cocktail once we sat down.

We actually arrived 15 minutes early, and when we got there, our table wasn't ready yet. No bother, we said, we'll just head to the bar and get a quick drink. I opted for a half pint of Budweiser, and my mum got a lemonade, which came to £5.50 in total.

As soon as we got our drinks, our table was ready, and we were taken to the seating area towards the back of the restaurant.

The place was abuzz with chatter. Pretty much every table was taken, and the atmosphere felt great. People were happily tucking into their dishes, and clinking glasses. I'd never seen anywhere so busy on a weekday (especially not that close to payday).

For starters, we went for the hot board (£16.50) - which was comprised of tater tot poutine, lamb koftas, a Cumberland Scotch egg, whole garlic prawns, baked camembert with prosciutto, and a wedge of fresh bread. Sadly, they were out of camembert, but the waiter said we could add anything else to the board from the nibbles and starters menu, free of charge. So we went for the crispy oyster mushrooms, which sounded amazing.

For me, the standouts had to be the crispy oyster mushrooms, and the Cumberland Scotch egg. The mushrooms were crispy and packed with salty flavours. Coated in polenta, they came with a truffle mustard mayo - I probably could've eaten another serving (or five) of those. And the Scotch egg was delicious - the



sausagemeat was seasoned perfectly and the egg was runny. What more could you ask for?

The garlic prawns had a bit of a kick, and my mum loved them - she made sure nothing went to waste as she mopped up the leftover garlicky oil with the warm bread.

The two lamb koftas were lovely, and once again packed a tiny spice kick. And I really enjoyed the tater tot poutine. I was expecting, as the name suggested, for them to come coated in cheese curds, and I'm pretty sure it was Cheddar on top. But it was crispy and delicious nonetheless.

Perfect for two, this sharing board really ticked all of the boxes and gave plenty of variety. I'd highly recommend ordering one - and for any non-meat eaters out there, there's also a vegan board as an alternative.

My only minor criticism with the starter (besides not having camembert) was the fact we weren't given small plates when our board arrived, and we had to wait 10 minutes before they came back and brought some out. It didn't stop us tucking in straight away, though.

For our mains, I had the fragrant curry (£12.95), and mum went for one of the restaurant's famous hanging kebabs, ordering the lamb kofta one (£13.95).

My curry was divine. The bowl was filled with salt and pepper rice noodles, pork belly slices, prawns, tofu chunks, and mangetout - all covered in a light curry sauce. It was filling, and mixing pork and prawns is an ideal dish for me. I'd definitely get this again.

Mum's lamb kofta hanging kebab was marinated in Middle Eastern spices, coated in harissa





The Botanist Pornstar and a Berry Colada

jam with garlic oil, and separated with red pepper and onion chunks. It came with a side of seasoned fries underneath, and looked great. She said it tasted wonderful and not fatty (which can be a problem when ordering lamb), but it was a bit awkward to eat without a plate.

Other dishes on the mains menu include a steak, stout and stilton pie, pan-fried seabass, and a crispy chicken burger.

With our mains, we also ordered a couple of cocktails. After all, The Botanist prides itself on what it calls its eponymous 'botanical cocktails' - it would be rude not to.

If you look through the menu, there's a whole host of cocktails categorised into sections such as 'fruit & floral', 'fresh & herbaceous', and 'citrus & spice' - with a few that are labelled as 'bartender recommended'. We both wanted to try one of the specials, so I ordered a Berry Colada (£8.50), and mum a Botanist Pornstar (£9.95). Fruity and flavoursome, these were extremely refreshing, but not overly strong.

By this point, we were absolutely stuffed. But we did have room to squeeze in a dessert to share. There's a lot of variety, so whether you want something sweet and fruit, or rich and chocolatey, all bases are covered. We went for the chocolate brownie fondant (£6.95), served warm with salted peanut sauce and vanilla ice cream. A few bites

in and I was done, but it was so rich and moreish. I wished I wasn't as full - otherwise I could have cleared the bowl.

All in all, the food and drinks and were great. My favourite had to be the sharing board, it really had an interesting mix of dishes, and made a nice change from the usual olives, cheese and tapas, or deep-fried sharing platters you get in a lot of places.

However, my only criticism would be the slow service. Between courses, the staff weren't that attentive and it took us a while to place our orders - especially as the night went on and the number of people dwindled. We weren't checked up on that often, and we were waiting about 20 minutes for the bill when we had clearly finished our food and drinks.

Also, they didn't ask if we wanted water for the table when we sat down, which I thought was weird. I feel you shouldn't have to ask for that, especially as the weather starts to warm up.

One thing I would like to applaud however is how, following recent Government guidelines that all menus across England must show the calorie count for every dish, The Botanist has theirs in a really fine, subtle grey font. So it's there - but not right in your face if you want to enjoy your evening without worrying about whether you should order that dessert or not.

Overall, I'd definitely recommend The Botanist. Our bill came to (£74.30), which I'd say is great value for money, especially when the restaurant itself looks and feels really high-end. Whether you want a full three-course meal, or a few drinks and some nibbles, there's plenty to choose from, and you won't leave feeling hungry. I'm already planning my next visit.



The Botanist's The Hot Board

INSET: Chocolate brownie fondant