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The DISCERNING DINER



Claudia Blake visits Manchega in Ripon



Ripon, Yorkshire's smallest city, has a wealth of attractions with which to beguile the visitor. They include an imposing gothic cathedral, three fascinating museums, and a scenic and nature-rich canal-side walk.

Another draw, especially for locals, is the wealth of quirky independent businesses that line Ripon's ancient streets – nowhere more so than in the narrow, winding lanes between the cathedral and the city's spacious market place.

It's here, on Duck Hill, that you'll find Manchega, a bustling tapas restaurant and wine bar set in a wonky, old brick-faced building. And don't worry, you're unlikely to miss it. Manchega's eye-catching exterior paintwork – golden yellow walls and vermilion doors and windows – brings a hint of the exotic to an otherwise unassuming street, conjuring up visions of boisterous fiestas and sweltering Mediterranean nights.

The exuberance continues inside, with more fiery paintwork and walls dotted with a variety of Iberian paraphernalia. It's a compact, cosy space, with a relaxed Bohemian vibe. There's a handful of wooden tables and a bar-cum-open-kitchen downstairs, and two dining rooms upstairs. Outside there's further seating in a terraced garden, but at lunchtime on a bitterly cold February day the indoor seats were a no-brainer.

Proprietor Richard was very much in evidence, chatting merrily and making new arrivals welcome. He's clearly very proud of his menu, of his carefully sourced ingredients, and of his local community. Keen to pump up the energy, he wants to do everything he can to make sure his guests have a good time.

As the colourful plates began to arrive, it was obvious that we were in for a treat. This isn't the lazy 'tapas lite' so typical of many so-called tapas restaurants in the UK. These are dishes created from authentic ingredients and prepared with conviction and flair.

LUSCIOUS LIVER

The Gordal olives were plump and succulent, and the salted Valencia almonds – accompanied by puffed corn – contributed a delicious savoury-sweet crunch. The crisp exteriors of croquettes filled with Manchego cheese and garlic concealed a luxurious, creamily melting filling.

Wild mushrooms with peppercorn sauce topped with an egg yolk proved to be an interesting and tasty combination. And patatas bravas – in this case served with a lovely garlic-heavy aioli and a sprinkling of parsley – provided a comforting dose of carbs.

Excellent though these were, the two glittering highlights of the savoury plates that we ordered were liver parfait with rhubarb and ginger compote, and chorizo with a wine and honey sauce.

Liver and rhubarb might sound like an implausible combination but, trust me, it really did work. The sharp tang of the rhubarb was the perfect foil for the unctuous earthiness of the liver, with a hint of gingery background warmth adding an extra subtlety to the experience.

As for the chorizo with wine and honey... well, I could happily have eaten it until I burst. Chorizo can sometimes be dry, but this one was moist and meatily moreish, with the rich, hearty, sweet-sharp red wine and honey sauce lifting it to a whole new level.