



# May the faucet be with you

**TABLE FOR TWO**  
*A modest riverside bar and restaurant impresses **Keith Miller***

Oundle in Northamptonshire is a strikingly pretty town: not quite Cotswolds-pretty or Harry Potter-pretty, but in that ballpark. It has a Victorian Gothic public school where the girls get to wear these huge David Bowie-ish trousers, though they'd suit the boys better if you ask me.

It also has its own oolitic limestone formation, which you really need if you want to get ahead in the prettiness stakes; there are quarries all down the Nene Valley's western side.

Thirdly, it has the Nene itself, the 10th-longest river in the UK, which joins the Grand Junction Canal outside Northampton, so you could, in theory, take a little boat all the way from the Thames at Brentford, west of London, to the Wash, avoiding the fleshpots of Frinton-on-Sea and the great gluteal convexity of East Anglia. And if that doesn't make your heart swell to bursting at the sheer wonder of the world, then it must be made of stone, oolitic or otherwise.

So Tap & Kitchen sits right on the Nene, at the edge of Oundle, in a little compound of new industrial buildings. Built, one presumes, on the site of a little compound of old industrial buildings, relics of which T&K has put on show both inside and out as a testament to an earlier chapter in the life of the place, in the manner of the mastodon skulls discovered on the isle of Capri in the time of Augustus, which proved it had once been joined on to the mainland, and which the emperor proudly displayed in the gardens of his villa.

T&K is an offshoot of the feted Nene Valley Brewery. We'd put it on our list because it seemed to be representative of some broader trend: a new dispensation between pub and restaurant, an exemplary "new vernacular" menu (grills, salads, a dash of Ottolenghi, three quite recherché pizzas, some more ambitious choices in the evening, lots of home-made elements throughout). I had expected it to be a bit more hipsterishly self-



aware and less eager to please than turned out to be the case – that's what its laconic name would have signalled in London, at any rate.

The space is open-plan, but subdivided by decor – there's a pubby bit with a bar, high tables, a wood-burning stove and steam-age paraphernalia hanging; a

restauranty bit, with a higher ceiling, a carpet that would drive my cats into a berserker frenzy and curtains on the windows; and some sort of VIP area at the far end where, I presume, the stars of Oundle's hip hop scene come to disport themselves.

The food was not show-stoppingly good, but it was quietly, consistently better-than-OK. Tea-poached duck breast toyed with a Chinese-restaurant cliché, laid atop a finger-sized blob of spring onion purée and scattered with charred pickled cucumber – though cooked thus, the meat was taut and almost metallic, and didn't have the sticky sweetness of its crispy aromatic counterpart. Hanger steak – "the butcher's cut", they call it, though maybe that's because you only get half a kilo or so of it per cow rather than because it's the best-tasting bit of the beast – came medium rare, well rested, sliced thickly, beautifully tender, nicely seasoned, with a festooning of watercress, a pot of minty-sweet "house chimichurri" and decent chips.

Puddings were grown-up takes on well-worn crowd-pleasers, accompanied by touchingly reticent wine recommendations: "Lemon posset, meringue, chantilly, lemon marmalade – perhaps a glass of palazzina?" Wine in general seemed intelligently chosen – they serve the lovely Château de Lascaux Pic St-Loup, the house wine of St John, in a box, by the glass at significantly sub-Johnnine prices.

In fact, that whole St John thing of plainish/British cooking, "plus the odd summer in the Dordogne", as someone waggishly said recently, represents one road down which somewhere like T&K,

starting from scratch in an area as knee-deep as Oundle obviously is in fantastic suppliers, might have gone. But I think they were right to set their parameters just a little wider.

What they are doing isn't wildly innovative. Many conventional pubs serve food that's more ambitious. Most other national papers might not think it worth reviewing at all.

But mid-lunch, with a cube of steak poised on my fork and "Cleaning Windows" by Van Morrison playing at a polite volume, and all the punters chattering and munching away (or, in the case of my neighbour, playing the derivatives market on his laptop), snug in their gilets or basking in the fug of the stove, I had a flashback to the mid-Eighties, when I got my first and, sadly, last pair of huge David Bowie-ish trousers, and when eating out, mostly, still meant deep-fried pub food, generic Indian or Chinese restaurants, doughy pizza or a well-done puck of rump steak at a Berni Inn.

The T&K template of a flexible and, in truth, fairly characterless, but far from unwelcoming, space, where ingredients of good quality and/or local provenance are prepared to simple but by no means unvarying recipes, and accessorised with a bit of spice and the odd fashionable flourish (Lobster oil!) is one that could well be imitated more widely. It knocks the endless cavalcade of Las Iguanas, Jamie's Italians, Real Greeks, Cabanas and Bill'ses – the Berni Inns de nos jours – that now dominate Britain's townscapes into a cocked hat, anyway.

Oundle Wharf, Station Road, Oundle, Northants PE8 4DE  
01832 275069; tapandkitchen.com

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Tap & Kitchen has an exemplary "new vernacular" menu

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**PINT TO PINT**

*Small Bar, Bristol*

You'd be forgiven if you thought Small Bar's name was something to do with a Lilliputian interior in which, as Keats might have written if he'd swapped felines for feathers, no cats do swing. However, small in this case refers to the size of the breweries whose beers this decidedly roomy establishment sells – small and independent (and delicious, I should add). Loafing on a corner at the top of King Street, this former club has two drinking areas on the ground and a comfy spot upstairs. The tables and chairs are post-modernist in their stripped wood sensuality. Meanwhile, barrels are handily placed as tables to congregate around.

On the Friday afternoon I pop my rain-soaked head in, the place is lively as office workers bunk off early and make their way along the taps, of which there are nearly 30.

"What sort of beer do you like?" asks the young woman behind the bar to a chap next to me. "Lager," he replies. A heartbeat later, she's offering a taster of local brewing heroes Lost and Grounded's crisp, refreshing Kellerbier. The lager drinker

grunts his approval and two-thirds of a pint is ordered. My turn: a glass of Duet from Small's sibling brewery Left Handed Giant. This is a luminously pale ale that glows in the glass; there's citrus, a light biscuitiness and a dry finish.

I scan the chalked up beer list at the back of the bar. There are IPAs, pale ales, dark and destructive strong beers and a couple that come under the moniker "crazy s---". Meanwhile, all around me, Bristol's beer connoisseurs and the end-of-the-week weary dive deep into Small's pool of exemplary beers.

Duet done, I'm ready for another, this time an imperious imperial stout from Manchester's Track Brewing, dark and destructively potent and surprisingly palatable. As I said, there's nothing small about Small Bar.

**Adrian Tierney-Jones**

31 King Street, Bristol BS1 4DZ; [smallbar.co.uk](http://smallbar.co.uk)

Our congratulations to Adrian, who has just been named Beer Writer of the Year in the British Guild of Beer Writers Awards

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