

The search for that perfect meal in Northumberland continues with a visit to one of Alnwick's newest restaurants, The Art House (formerly Bibby's, in Bondgate Within. Gazette editor Paul Larkin took the taste test.

The Art House is one elegant restaurant. Class oozes from the walls and furniture, and luckily from the menu as well. It is a cosy setting-along an alleyway and up a steep flight of stairs. Disabled access is nigh-on impossible, although in the summer the ground floor, open air courtyard does open to visitors.

Once inside, the small dining area is divided by an intrusive wall, which would be ideal as a glass block or frosted glass partition to create more of a feeling of space without compromising the intimacy.

As the name suggests, the restaurant doubles as a contemporary art gallery, so you can contemplate how that print or photograph will look in your living room while you enjoy your feast. You also have plenty of time to mull over the price tag! If modern art is your bag then you'll be at home, if not, you may be put off your meal by today's equivalents of Cezanne's Les Grands Baigneurs.

Our meal was accompanied by some great music, mainly Marvin Gaye and Motown classics. Only a wobbly table and cheap paper napkins spoiled the ambience.

The menu was concise, with a choice of six starters and nine main courses. (Including two vegetarian in each case).

It also carried a pledge that all food was "freshly prepared using only the finest local produce", this being another restaurant on the Alnwick Food Festival Food Trial, which promotes outlets that support local producers and healthy eating.

Small restaurants are wise to limit their menus, especially in the leaner winter months, so that such promises can be properly fulfilled.

Starters ranged in price from £3.95 for creamy mushroom soup to £5.50 for grilled New Zealand mussels, while the main courses started at £6.95 for spaghetti with tomato and pesto sauce and rose to £16.95 for char-grilled fillet steak with fries, salad or veg.

Our evening began with a large glass of red wine- Australian Shiraz (£3.50 a glass or £16.50 for the bottle) – from a wine list that boasted a selection of a dozen popular reds and whites, costing from £11.50 to £22.50 a bottle. It was a very palatable wine with a sweet, fruity taste.

The food arrived promptly and exquisitely presented, mine the pan-fried squid with chilli oil (£4.25) and my wife's the caramelised onion tart (£3.95).

The rocket topping each was as crisp as the moment it had been picked – not a wilted leaf in sight. In fact, the freshness of the salad was a highlight of the entire meal.

Badly cooked calamari is like eating rubber bands, but this was quality squid cooked to perfection, with the spicy chilli oil giving a biting, contrasting taste.

The puff pastry base of my wife's onion tart was light enough not to completely fill her up before the main course, and the caramelised onion filling was gentle and full of flavour.

Enough time was allowed between courses for our palates to recover without there being a long wait. A good meal should be paced and not rushed, nor drawn out.

I have opted for the chicken breast with tarragon sauce and sauté potatoes (£9.50). I also requested a side order of fresh garden vegetables (£2.25), which were not included in the main course price. I must admit I would rather have an all-inclusive price.

The aromatic, creamy sauce, with its strong smell of tarragon will not be to everyone's taste but I thoroughly enjoyed it its richness and abundance of onions.

The vegetables were boiled potatoes, carrot strips, green beans and more onions – were perfectly cooked. You'll not find any better – delicious, not over –done and so fresh.

My wife was in raptures over her choice of oven-baked mushroom and spinach cannelloni with mixed leaves (£7.50), and a side order of garlic bread.

This was not something she would normally choose but she would certainly have it again.

The mushrooms and spinach were wrapped in the delicate crepe pancakes, which wallowed in a tomato, herb and cheese sauce – very filling.

Neither of us really has enough room for a sweet, but took a peak at the menu all the same, as you do!

The temptation was too much and we decided to share the mixed berry and cheesecake (£4.95) from a selection of six deserts, although looking across to a neighbouring table, both the fresh fruit salad (£3.95) and the profiteroles with chocolate sauce (£4.95) looked delicious.

The cheesecake was worth the gamble. It was rich, yet light, very fruity, with a wafer-thin base, swirls of fruity sauce and a selection of fruits, including redcurrants, blackcurrants and strawberries completed the work of art.

That was it – we were well and truly fed!

The bill came to £43.90, that's with only one sweet and no coffees.

For the quality of food, this was not extortionate.

Star ratings (out of five)

Quality of food 4 and a half

Choice 3

Vegetarian choice 4

Value for money 4 and a half

Atmosphere 4

Service 4

Children catered for 3

Disabled access 1

Overall experience 4

Verdict: fantastic food!