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EATING AT MAD O'ROURKE'S PIE FACTORY

Charles Campion
lunches in a
legendary Black
Country pub

There's been a coaching inn on the corner of Hurst Lane in Tipton for centuries and the present pub was built in 1923. In those days it was called the Doughty Arms and was home to a famous boxing club. Fast forward to 1987 when the site was taken over by Colm O'Rourke and re-named Mad O'Rourke's Pie Factory. During the next decade O'Rourke built up a small chain of fifteen pubs which he sold to Fishers of Trowbridge. The brewery didn't have much luck with these idiosyncratic eating houses and in 2000 Peter Towler (O'Rourke's right-hand man) was able to take over the original Pie Factory with his wife Sue and run it as a Freehouse.

There's no doubt about it, this is an eccentric place. If you ever wondered why Colm O'Rourke ended up called "Mad" O'Rourke just glance around at his legacy. The décor is odd. The seating is odd. The butcher's block tables are odd. The menu is very odd. The sawdust on the floor is odd. In these politically correct times, calling someone "mad" for such a brazen display of swimming against the tide is frowned upon, but everything about the Pie Factory is "Black Country Bolshie." Beer is taken very seriously, as are lager, and cider. CAMRA members can get a 10% discount on presenting their membership cards. They can also choose from a splendid array of real ales: 4% Lumhammer (brewed for the pub by Enville Ales); 4.9% Golden Lumham-

mer (another beer brewed specially for the pub); Henrietta from Welbeck Abbey Brewery (3.6%); Green King I.P.A (3.6%); and Hereford Light Ale from the Hereford Brewery (4%). To anyone accustomed to paying London prices, the food at O'Rourke's is jaw-droppingly cheap. There's a long menu with many sections but the majority of starters are priced at £3.50 each. The seven different pies rarely stray over £9. The most expensive dish is an eight-ounce sirloin steak for £11.99. What's more, there are 28 different main course options. Peter Towler has put together a menu that is based around inspired home-cooking and freely admits that he can only keep prices at this level by making absolutely everything from the chips to the

pastry or the pie fillings in house. This is ale, £8.99); hen pecked pie (chicken and honest food that turns up in very large mushroom, £8.99); Andy Murray (curry!) portions. As it was once part of our Industrial heartland the West Midlands is feeling the latest recession acutely and that (steak and stilton, £9.99). And the daddy dictates a menu that features value. of them all, the pie on which O'Rourke's Setting to one side the merits of start- ers like cheese nachos (£3.50); bostin Dan's Cow Pie (£9.99) - "steak and kidney mushrooms - "bostin" is Black Country dialect for "jolly good" (£3.50); all slowly cooked together in O'Rourke's and loaded potato skins (£3.75). Go for famous gravy. Baked with a pastry lid and the black pudding potato cake (£3.50) - pastry horns, all 4lb comes to your reinforcement this is the best starter costing under £4 forced table". that I have ever eaten. It looks like a fish- cake, but the inside is a well seasoned flaky pastry top has two "horns" baked mixture of black pudding and mashed into it, each is about the size of a large potato. It comes in a rather odd looking croissant. You would need to be very square sided bowl and is topped with a hungry - and the possessor of some re-fried egg. It's huge. It's crisply coated. It's ally fine teeth - to eat the horns because made with excellent black pudding. The potato cake and egg yolk combination is made in heaven. And it costs buttons. very sound. The gravy is well-seasoned A good many customers here skip the starters because they know that the pies are formidable. They have sly names : 100% bullocks pie (steak and

With pies it is all too easy to make the gravy too thick, or even worse not thick enough. The Desperate Dan is a well-balanced pie and the only way it could be improved would be to up the percentage of kidney for those of us who are offal enthusiasts. In this monster prince among pies the meat is cut fairly large and there are hunks of potato, carrot and swede. All the components hold their shape but are still very tender - something that can only be achieved by long, slow cooking of the filling. This is also leads to a magnificent concentration of flavours. Peter Towler is very proud of the battered chips, which are homemade chips with a coating - satisfactorily crisp, but the mashed potato is the better option - real potato, mashed, you can tell by the occasional small lump. The remainder of the menu sprawls onwards across the page - Micks grill (£9.99) is described as a navy's delight; surf 'n' turf (£11.99); apparently Desperate Dan also did a line in spare ribs (half rack £7.99, whole £9.99). And there's fish

and chips - according to the menu they are "as good as any chippy" (£7.99). Puds are homemade: bread and butter; Eton mess; apple pie; sticky toffee and so forth - all at £3.50. Service is friendly and business-like, and the food at the Pie Factory is honest and uncompromising - big portions with small price tags. But the specials are even more impressive - on Monday you can have a pie, chips and a pint for £5. On Wednesday, pies are two for the price of one, and that is perhaps why Wednesday is often the busiest night of the week. Just when you think things cannot get much madder, you spot a sign outside the front door advertising "nearly en-suite" bedrooms. Based on two people sharing a twin room, the deal includes evening meal, bed and breakfast for £20 a head. It's hard to think that there could be any cheaper deal than that in the whole of Britain, although there would doubtless be a Pound or so supplement were you to choose Desperate Dan's cow pie for your evening meal.

LOCAL
INGREDIENTS AT
MAD O'ROURKE'S

Potatoes from Baker's Farm

Beef and pork from Bridgnorth

Lamb from Shropshire

Veg from Wolverhampton Market

Strawberries from Asda - the Tipton Branch

Mad O'Rourke's Pie Factory, Hurst Lane, Tipton, West Midlands.
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