

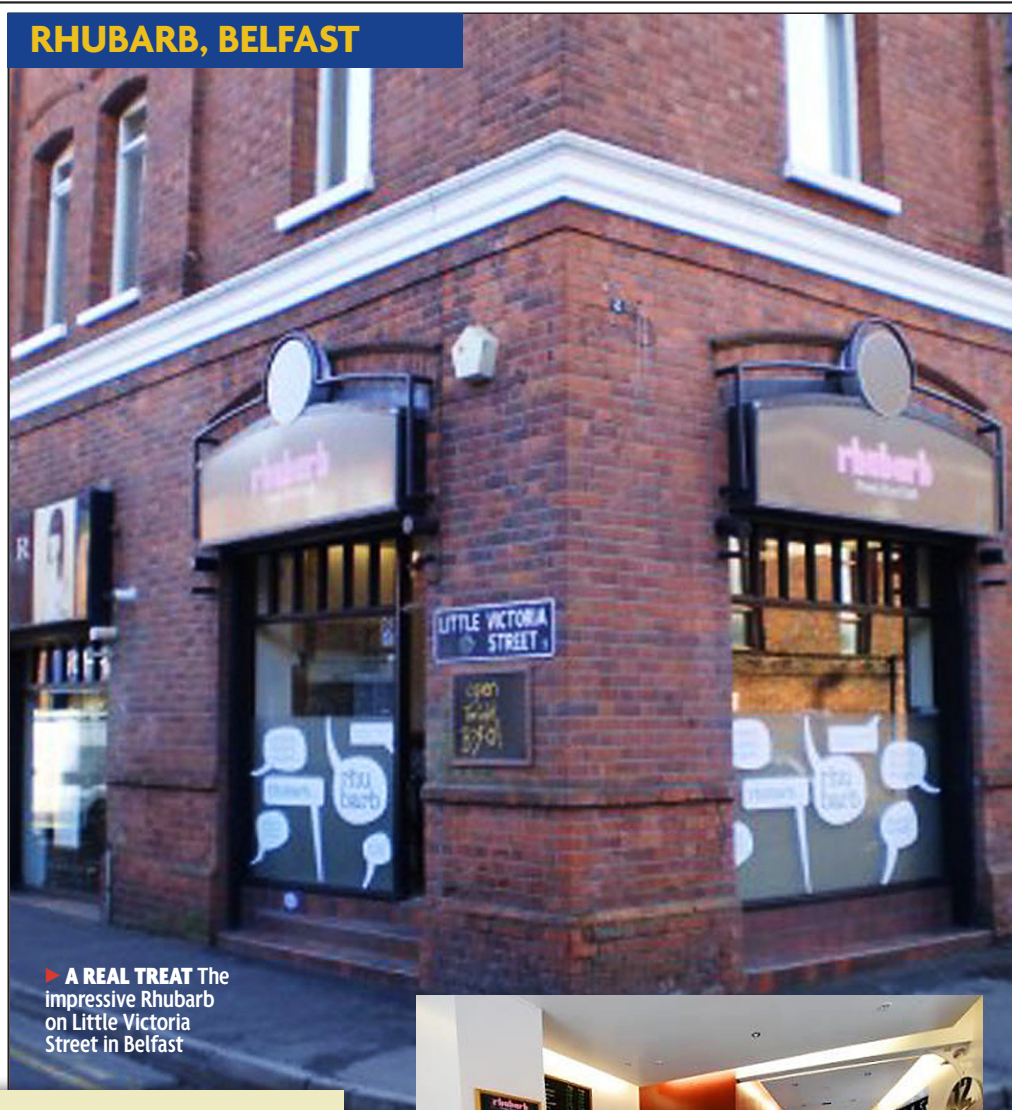


food & drink

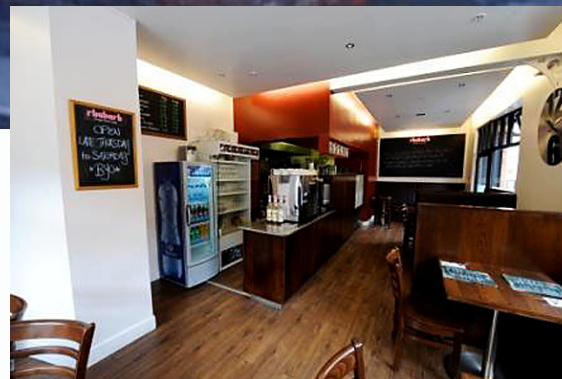
WITH PHIL FINNEGAN

What better way to mark a happy occasion than with two couples – and three of the four wearing a skirt – sampling the many delights in the small-but-perfectly-formed **Rhubarb** in central **Belfast**

RHUBARB, BELFAST



► **A REAL TREAT** The impressive Rhubarb on Little Victoria Street in Belfast



DESPITE what certain shouty, furrow-faced TV chefs might have us believe, running a restaurant needn't be a life-or-death operation.

With a realistic business plan, a little bit of gump-tion and a commitment to serving good quality food you can go a long way. And Rhubarb has this combination in spades.

It's in the centre of Belfast on Little Victoria Street but isn't the sort of place you'd ever be driving past, so its success owes much to a word-of-mouth reputation.

I first ate in Rhubarb soon after it opened a couple of years ago and was very impressed although a little concerned that the location may count against it in the long run. I returned recently to see if it had maintained its high standards and I wasn't disappointed.

It's a very small space by restaurant standards but the owners have wisely decided not to shoehorn too many customers in at once.

This common-sense approach extends to their hours of business with Rhubarb serving breakfast and lunch all week but only opening for dinner on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, ensuring the staff are never stuck twiddling their thumbs during the week's quieter nights.

Indeed, both times I've visited for dinner there has only been one waitress working, so the fact that the service has never been noticeably slow is an achievement in itself. The chefs also use only locally-sourced beef, poultry and seafood, guaranteeing freshness.

To start I had a warm salad of crispy pork, which came served with a mix of pear slices and toasted walnuts. It was an interesting dish with no two mouthfuls the same and I was surprised by how well the contrasting flavours balanced.

My Scottish companion normally eats only porridge and haggis so he just seemed happy to be in a proper restaurant and he fairly hoovered up his pesto chicken salad, which my gal also ordered.

She was a little unimpressed by it on the grounds that it was slightly oily but I was happy enough to finish it off nonetheless. Her main of pan-fried seabass with saute potatoes was a much more satisfactory dish. The fish was lightly fried and subtly flavoured, while the little spuds were well worth me risking a fork to the back of the hand over.

Being a bore, I ordered pork belly for my main course too, which was top class. The meat just slid apart under a little duress from my knife and each mouthful was wonderfully tender.

The Highlander wasn't for messing around with any fancy food and ordered the steak, which he quietly devoured in a couple of minutes, giving it the

thumbs-up when I asked how it was, steadfastly refusing to waste time speaking.

His lassie was in uncharacteristically generous form and offered me a couple of her scallops with a little chorizo – always a winning combination in my book.

Few dining experiences are as disappointing as badly-cooked scallops, it feels like a criminal waste of a real delicacy. Fortunately, these beauties were fried to a buttery perfection and felt like they would melt in your mouth if you allowed them.

Aside from the menu, another big pull factor in Rhubarb's favour is that timeless classic, the beautiful BYO. The corkage charge is slightly higher than many

places at £2.50 a bottle of wine and 80p a beer but we took advantage of the chance to crack open some good stuff as we were belatedly celebrating their engagement.

And while he may be a Scotsman, he's never been tight, producing a bottle of champagne as we waited for our coffees – Calypso for the ladies, Irish for me, sensible for the Jock.

The combination of caffeine, whiskey and bubbly left me feeling a little unsteady as we left. Fortunately, it was windy outside and as all three of my companions were wearing skirts, a decision was made to get a taxi, sparing all our blushes.

menu...

Warm salad of crispy pork £5.95
Pesto chicken salad (x2) £5.50
Breads and dips £3.95
Seabass £13.95
Scallops £15.95

Pork belly £14.95
Sirloin steak £17.95
Liqueur coffee (x3) £3.95
Corkage (x4) £2.50

Total: £105.55

pub spy

WITH SWIG MCGUINNESS

THERE comes a time in everyone's life when they should realise they are too old for certain things.

Swig is too old for skinny jeans, skinny ties and trousers slung around the lower portion of my buttocks.

I am also too old to drink alcopops, know what a mash-up is and until recently thought Armand Van Helden was a vampire hunter.

Being contractually obliged to drink every week (hard to explain to my doctor) I occasionally discover a watering hole which, while required to cast a fair critical eye over, I realise I am also too old for.

21 Social – risen from the ashes of The Potthouse – is just such a place.

From the pavement you'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise as the rather swish-looking

ground-floor eatery and bar is certainly frequented by a mixed age group in the earlier part of the night. But venture to the upstairs nightclub and the only over-30s feeling at ease are the sadly delusional.

One thing I did recognise was the decor, with glossy back tiles behind the bar, upholstered walls, mirrored surfaces and flashes of vivid orange – an 80s homage if ever there was one.

The music sadly was very 2010. Not 2010 as in Beyonce or even Lady Gaga – tunes you could actually hum – but rather 2010 discordant car alarms sounding en masse in a seemingly



endless cacophony sans melody, sans lyrics, sans everything.

Mrs Swig did get chatted up during an interminably long bar wait but didn't know whether to take it as a compliment or insult when I explained that the yoof in question must have thought her a Cougar and then had to explain to her exactly what that was.

The top floor is supposedly reserved for VIPs – though Belfast's qualifying criteria is presumably pretty lax – but with more of the same droning and more of the same 20-somethings apparently happy to have their ears assaulted by it, the Cougar and I made good our escape.

wines of the week



WITH MAURICE FITZMAURICE

IS getting Christmas presents in at the start of October premature or prudent? But with the credit crunch hitting, you have to spread the pain.

What's really annoying, though, is when you try and take advantage of those so-called offers at the big toy shops you find that most of the things the kids want are out of stock.

Mysteriously, they seem to get restocked soon after the offer ends.

It's enough to drive Santa to drink. And that too can be bought now in time for Christmas and at great savings.

Lidl are holding a "Beer festival" and although the shop is normally cheap anyway, this week is particularly good value.

And with Lidl being a German outfit, their loyalty to their own beer is most welcome.

For a decent lager, it's hard to beat the Germans with their Reinheitsgebot purity laws.

Although, apparently, the 1516 edict apparently doesn't actually apply any more as modern beer makers need yeast as well as the Reinheitsgebot permissible water, hops and barley.

Among those on offer is Franziskaner which I can personally guarantee as being fabulous. Leffe and Hoegaarden from Belgium are also great.

I don't know about you, but I'm certainly getting a few four-packs in for Christmas so I have a few beers at the ready for those post-big-dinner days when you've had a skinful of fine wine and fancy something different.

Hopefully, though, I can get them in and not drink it all before Santa comes.



tried and tasted

The Franziskaner on offer for a pound for a half-litre bottle is beautiful, crisp and a little lemony.

The four-packs of Leffe and Hoegaarden are just £4, which is a fair bit cheaper than usual. The Leffe is deliciously malty while the Hoegaarden is as refreshing a white beer as you're likely to find.

For a real bargain try the six-packs of Perlenbacher Pils. Not so interesting as the above (and I wonder what hops 'extract' is) but for £4 for all those half-litre bottles it does the job.

