



Forget the hounds, ride out to this pub

By Rick Nichols
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In a moment, we'll get into a disquisition on the peculiar anatomy of the Scotch egg (best finished with a dab of Coleman's Hot Mustard) and the curious etymology, as provided by bartender Allen Hudson, of the seafood "Luxury Pie" that's making its debut on the spring menu, and - well, why not? - I'll be happy to taste a bit of the sticky toffee pudding.

But first, let's settle in at the Whip, soak up the flavor of the place, a genteel country pub in a crossroads called Springdell, so deep in purebred Chester County horse country that, as a fellow on the next bar stool put it: "You could say we're in the middle of nowhere, but it's not really that central."

You could say its remoteness (or more precisely, its off-the-beaten-pathness) is a large part of its charm. Doe Run rushes by out back, swollen with April's runoff. Fenced green pastures gallop in every

direction, unbroken by edifice. But the fact is, its nowhere-ness - near the intersection of Routes 82 and 841 - is the very reason for its being: There was no decent place to eat for miles.

In earlier iterations, the site was a blacksmith shop and wagon-wheelery and, later on, a cowboy bar for the hands riding herd on the King Ranch's 4,300-acre beef-fattening operation that sprawled across the hills hereabouts.

Two years ago, though, co-owners K.C. Kulp, a recovering stockbroker, and horseman Luke A. Allen envisioned a place for the other Chester County - not the old rough riders, but the three-day event riders; adios, cowboys, and howdy, Michael Matz, Barbaro's mythic trainer, and the Strawbridge heiresses, wiry Irish jockeys and Derby strategists, nearby neighbor Dick Vermeil, and foxhunters, pony racers and steeplechasers.

For a decent meal, this crowd should drive 20 minutes to Kennett Square? 40 minutes to the bright lights of West

Chester? Forget about the steel town of Coatesville, six miles north.

The new owners raised the roof, pitching it steeper, exposing the rafters: "Before, you could touch the ceiling," a local pointed out: "Not that you'd want to."

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They warmed the walls with clubby paneling. Hung inviting English lanterns; scrubbed away all trace of neon beer-sign or sporting paraphernalia, excepting the bronzed riding crop that they had sculpted for the door handles.

If there was to be a tasteful evocation of the English hunt scene, certainly tasteful food would need to follow suit.

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BUSINESS

That job would fall to Jason Ziglar, a serious young chef, late of the revamped Marshalltown Inn.

It is Wednesday, race night at the Whip, but there's a lull after lunch, before the screenings get under way. Stragglers finish their pints of Guinness. On the flat-screen TV over the fireplace, a cricket championship flickers listlessly.

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Ziglar presides over a standard menu - a popular steak au poivre (\$25.95), pan-seared scallops with pear and cardamom chutney, and a ragu of Chester County specialty mushrooms with braised veal short rib.

But it's the well-rendered English fare - the Toad-in-the-Hole (sausages in skillets of puffed Yorkshire pudding), a leek-and-cabbage-stuffed potato cake known as "Bubble and Squeak," ground lamb (not beef!) shepherd's pie - that appears to fuel patrons at the bar, huddled at the communal coffee table and at a fair number of the family tables in back, as well.

There were challenges. Ziglar tried six brands of pork banger sausage for the bangers and mash, before finding a good one. He was loath to attempt the owners' request for a Scotch egg, the components of which are a hard-cooked egg wrapped in a thin layer of ground pork, lightly breaded and then deep-fried, so as not to slight any of the cholesterol-food groups. (Still, with Coleman's mustard, folks, you can't put it down; it's hot and crunchy outside, slick and rich and cool in the interior.)

By early evening, Ziglar is back cranking up the kitchen. A misty twilight falls on countryside - on the blanketed thoroughbreds sauntering to Augustin Stables, on Green Lawn Farm and Fat Chance Farm and Mercer Hill, over the



kennels for the hounds and winding lanes with signs posted, "Horses Jogging." The bar is filling up. A jockey pours onion gravy on his sizzling Toad-in-the-Hole, at \$5.95 "cheap and cheerful," he says.

I order the new item - a mashed-potato-and-cheddar-cheese-topped Luxury Pie, which an English emigre informs me is a version of your basic codfish pie, a Newburg-esque casserole, upgraded with scallops, or mussels, or other fancier shellfish.

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I'm about to explore the subject, when hoofbeats thunder off the rafters, heads jerk to the TV, and riders clear the last jump, charging to the finish in the 65th-annual running of the Brandywine Hills Point-to-Point steeplechase.

It is difficult, as races follow races, whoops follow groans, to regain any undivided attention. But I draw my own conclusion about the Luxury Pie, seasoned with dill and capers, baked in light seafood broth with a touch of sour cream: Comfort food of the highest order! (As is most of the Whip's English fare, better than sorry renditions I've had in most real English pubs.)

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