



# PICK OF THE PUBS

Brett Barnes, co-owner and head chef of *The Fox & Hounds in Barley*, on UK recognition and mixing the classics with refined dining

**N**estled in the heart of the charming village of Barley, *The Fox & Hounds* stands as a quintessential English country pub with a remarkable contemporary pedigree. With origins dating back over 350 years, this Grade II-listed inn beautifully preserves its historic character – from the original oak beams and roaring fireplaces to the iconic hanging sign that has adorned its façade for decades – while embracing modern culinary excellence and warm hospitality.

Under the stewardship of co-owner and head chef Brett Barnes, *The Fox & Hounds* has evolved into a destination gastropub, where seasonally-driven British cooking takes centre stage. Its menus celebrate the very best of local and regional produce, blending traditional pub favourites with imaginative, thoughtfully crafted dishes that reflect the rhythm of the seasons. Whether you're savouring a perfectly roasted Sunday lunch, a refined multi-course dinner, or sampling innovative small plates with a glass of wine, the quality of the food here consistently earns praise.

This commitment to outstanding ingredients and relaxed yet refined dining hasn't gone unnoticed. In 2025, *The Fox & Hounds Barley* was named number 36 in *The Good Food Guide's* Top 100 Best Pubs in the UK, a testament to its status among the country's leading hospitality venues and a remarkable achievement for a village pub. As such, it was the perfect time for *Absolutely* to revisit and chat to Brett about how they have achieved this success.

**Q** *Congratulations on being ranked 36th in the Good Food Guide Top 100 Pubs. What was your first reaction when you saw the listing, and how do you think this recognition reflects what you're doing at the pub?*

**A** I was delighted of course, but there was also an element of relief as we have been nominated for many awards over the years and not quite got over the finish line!

**Q** *When you first took over The Fox & Hounds Barley, what was your vision for it, and how has that vision evolved over time?*

**A** I'm pleased to say that we have stuck to our original vision for the pub over the years, and the *Good Food Guide* entry is a great indication that our perseverance is now paying off. As a chef, a strong food offering was always my priority, but we also wanted the pub to be accessible and welcoming – not a fancy restaurant posing as a pub. I think we have achieved that.

**Q** *Your background spans kitchens such as Arbutus, Hix Soho and Fäviken. How did your experiences in those high-end restaurants influence the way you run The Fox & Hounds?*

**A** Working in such esteemed kitchens obviously teaches you a lot about food and cooking, as well as how to organise a professional kitchen. But probably the most important lesson was how to source excellent produce and treat it in a respectful way. This is a lesson that can be applied to any food business, from a 5 star hotel to a street food van (which I did have for a summer, about 10 years ago!).

**Q** *The Good Food Guide review mentions that you produce "a well-thought-out, fairly priced menu ... appealing for slap-up celebrations or midweek drop-ins". How do you balance the fine-dining pedigree with the more accessible pub environment?*

**A** This is something that we have always

sought to offer on our menus. There is always a selection of "pub classics" available – fish & chips, burger, sausage & mash – and these are competitively priced. We then have more restaurant style dishes, which showcase a bit more technique and flair, and perhaps use more luxury ingredients. The idea being there is something for everyone, whether it be a quick midweek lunch, or a special occasion.

**Q** *Could you walk us through your food philosophy: what matters most to you in terms of ingredients, cooking techniques, and flavour?*

**A** We source as locally as possible and I think it's really important to support British farmers. Seasonality is absolutely paramount – cooking ingredients in season doesn't just mean the ingredients taste better, it's also more sustainable, and actually more exciting for the chefs and customers alike. We like to keep the style of dishes British for the most part, with a little influence from the continent here and there.

**Q** *How has your location shaped the character of The Fox & Hounds, in terms of style, seasonality or sourcing?*

**A** We said from the start that we wanted the F&H to be a traditional English country pub, and we have tried to reflect this in the decor, as well as the food and drink offering. We have open fires, local ales, seasonal pies and puddings – all of the things you hope to find in a country pub, but rarely do!

**Q** *The Good Food Guide review observes your "commitment to seasonality is real but understated" – with examples such as pig's head croquette or hake with surf clams. Could you pick a dish that perfectly embodies your seasonal approach and explains its development?*

**A** We change our menu weekly, sometimes daily, but there are certain dishes that reappear every year. For example, as soon as local asparagus becomes available, it goes



straight on the menu with a duck egg and home grown pea shoots. The exact detail of the dish may change year on year, but the flavour combination remains the same, and it's something that the customers love.

**Q** *What are the biggest challenges you face as a pub-restaurant in a village setting when aspiring to high culinary standards, and how do you address them?*

**A** It's definitely not as easy to source ingredients as it was when I was working in London, where you could get literally anything you can imagine at the drop of a hat. It requires a bit more planning and careful sourcing, and the internet can be quite handy when sourcing things like caviar and truffles!

**Q** *How do you maintain consistency – both on the food side and the hospitality side – when you're serving everything from midweek casual meals to celebration dinners?*

**A** The most important thing is the team. We have been very fortunate that the core of the team – head chef, sous chef, general manager – have all been with us for years and I think it really shows in the consistency of our offering both front and back of house.

**Q** *Looking ahead, what are your aspirations for The Fox & Hounds over the next 2-3 years?*

**A** I've only ever had one aspiration for the pub and that is to be busy, popular, and well regarded by customers and industry peers. If we can continue to do that, I'll be happy. 🍷

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