# Deanes Meat Locker, Belfast: ‘They have the good stuff’ – restaurant review

At this excellent steak house, great cooking and unstuffy service show the way forward

[**Deanes Meat Locker**](https://www.michaeldeane.co.uk/)**, 28-40 Howard Street, Belfast BT1 6PF (028 9033 1134). Starters £4.50-£14.50, mains £18.95-£39.50, desserts £7.50, wines from £24.95**

Nothing lasts forever. Just ask Michael Deane. Next Friday will see the last service at [Deanes Eipic](https://www.deaneseipic.com/), the grand, crisp-tableclothed restaurant that he opened in 1997 and which has held one of Belfast’s few Michelin stars for much of the intervening 25 years, and never had an apostrophe. Sadly, he says, it just doesn’t work any more; not when the tasting menu, with its cod in a champagne and yeast beurre blanc or its shorthorn tartare with quail’s egg, costs £100 a head. Deane recognises increased cost sensitivity “which is out of kilter with our fine dining offering at Eipic”. He has acknowledged the scourge of Brexit and the pestilence of Covid. People want something else, and he’s ready to give it to them.

Eipic, which trades only from Thursday to Saturday, occupies the left-hand side of a trio of restaurants writ large with the chef’s name along Howard Street in the city centre. In the middle is his seafood place, Love Fish. To the right of that is Deanes Meat Locker. There are no trophies for guessing what’s on the menu at the latter. Belfast does steaks like Rome does chapels. The city’s menus come embossed with lyric poems about the quality of the ingredients available on the island of Ireland, and rightly so. The rain falls. The pasture is lush. They have the good stuff. Don’t muck about with it.

Tonight is a Tuesday, when most restaurants of note in Belfast are closed, presumably because they can’t get the custom. But Deanes Meat Locker is doing a brisk trade. The womb of a red-walled dining room feels like a happy place, the rhythm of the chatter marked out by the clatter of knife and fork on plate. It’s the sound of a good time. Deane is here, on the dining room side of the pass, checking each dish as it goes out, and looking pleasingly like the pen-and-ink caricature of himself on the menu: chef’s whites; silver hair, swept back in a leonine wave; rectangular steel-framed glasses.

The body of the menu will not surprise anyone. That’s the point of a place like this: to not be surprising. There’s a list of steaks to be cooked on the clanking Argentine asador grill, on display behind the huge plateglass window at the back. Here are T-bones and chateaubriands for sharing. Here are sauces and here are chips. Is it strong on vegetarian and vegan options? Is Boris Johnson honest and trustworthy? It’s called the Meat Locker. The clue is in the name.

Executing a menu like this should be straightforward: buy the good stuff; treat it with care. And that does underpin what they’re doing. They have salt-aged sirloin steaks and sugar-pit bacon chops with crisped, sweet ribbons of fat, both from the great [Hannan Meats](https://www.hannanmeats.com/) in Moira. We get them sliced for sharing, with a pepper sauce that’s not afraid of its own name, and a loose chimichurri. Both pieces of meat have been charred and allowed to rest. The chips are thick-cut and crisp, and crenellated in places so you find yourself flicking through the beaten metal pot in search of the perfect specimen. In truth, they are all great and, eventually, they are all gone. Our plates come with a peppery rocket and parmesan salad, which eases the steaks on their way.

But among the starters there are also strong marks of the skill, which has brought all the accolades to Eipic further down the building. Two fat scallops are crisp seared and the butter-bronzed surface then sprinkled with salt crystals. Between them is a large teardrop of a Jerusalem artichoke purée so silky and smooth it could lubricate the most recalcitrant of machinery. The dish is completed by a pig head fritter, its meaty, gelatinous soul restrained by a shattering carapace. The dish is complicated to prepare, but simple to eat. Cubes of well-rendered pork belly have been given the strident gochujang treatment of Korean fried chicken. Each piece crunches then melts, leaving behind a gasp of sweet chilli heat. They rest on an acutely judged sweet-sour Asian slaw. Start with a couple of local oysters with the zip of passion fruit, or a trio of bitterballen, those stupidly satisfying Dutch beef croquettes, lubricated by the hit of mustard dolloped on top.

We conclude all this, more out of duty than appetite, with a spiced crème brûlée. The shattering burnt sugar gives way to creamy depths hiding soft stewed apple. Alongside is a crunchy chocolate-chip cookie. There will be a winter-dark chocolate and Seville orange tart made with the crispest of sable biscuit, which very much needs the quenelle of clotted cream on top. Unusually for a steakhouse like this, the wine list is light on stupid statement bottles. The vast majority are priced below £40. It’s designed to encourage you to forget the passage of time and live in the present tense. Service is collaborative. They want to help you have a good time.

Michael Deane has long been a standard bearer for the shiniest of high-end cookery in Belfast, particularly fêted for his skills as a mentor to ambitious young chefs. But he’s clearly also extremely good at the laidback and enfolding. At dinner’s end, I find him at a back table chatting to a regular. Closing Eipic had to be done, he tells me. The restaurant I’ve just eaten in will expand into the rest of the space. There will be a few changes to the menu, but what I’ve just had is roughly the way forward.

There’s a lot of it about. A few weeks ago, chef Kray Treadwell of Birmingham’s [670 Grams](https://670grams.com/) announced he was scrapping the tasting menu format, because it was sucking the life and the joy out of his dining room. From next year he will be running a relaxed à la carte menu. Michael O’Hare of [the Man Behind the Curtain](https://themanbehindthecurtain.co.uk/) in Leeds has announced the end of his tasting menu. “We’re not looking for that any more,” he said on Instagram, citing the impact of Brexit, Covid and the cost-of-living crisis. “Things need to change.” The new restaurant will apparently be much more relaxed. In Herefordshire, the tasting menu-based [Pensons](https://www.pensons.co.uk/) is closing altogether because of “inflationary pressures”. Identifying a trend from a few examples is always risky. But if we’re moving away from formality and have-what-your-given tasting menus and towards nights like the one I had at Deanes Meat Locker, we’re in a pretty good place.