**The Black Bull Inn, Sedbergh: ‘We were properly fed and watered’ – restaurant review**

It may be a classic Cumbrian pub, but the Black Bull knows how to please a far more diverse crowd

**The Black Bull Inn, 44 Main Street, Sedbergh LA10 5BL (015396 20264,**[**theblackbullsedbergh.co.uk**](https://www.theblackbullsedbergh.co.uk/)**). Snacks £4.50-£6.50, sandwiches £6.95-£14.95, starters £9.95-£10.9, mains £18.50-£27.95, desserts £7.50-£8.50, wines from £28**

It would be easy to misread the Black Bull at Sedbergh, located in that part of the Yorkshire Dales which offers a lofty wave to the Lake District. On a weekday lunchtime, the dining rooms fill quickly with parents in expensive waxed outerwear, grabbing lunch with their kids from the eponymous boarding school that dominates the town. A parade of burgers and sandwiches, precision stabbed with cocktail sticks, alongside soups with doorstep slabs of bread, troop out of the kitchen. And a pint please for the pink-cheeked, broad-chested chap with the Range Rover outside.

This may be both the Black Bull’s literal and figurative bread and butter; the way that any multi-purpose country pub earns its crust and crumb. But take a look at the bar menu that those family groups are ordering from and another story begins to unfurl. Yes, it includes beef and horseradish sandwiches, and another filled with hot roast pork from nearby [Mansergh Hall Farm](https://www.manserghhall.co.uk/), famous in the Lune Valley for its outdoor-reared pigs. So far, so shabby chic. But there are other less traditional things: a chickpea and lentil curry for example, or a pork and kimchi stew, or perhaps crispy Korean beef with shiso and sesame, offered as a snack.

The same juggling act is there in the layout of the place. To the left of the front door is the bar area. It comes complete with beers from [Fell Brewery](https://fellbrewery.co.uk/), [Lakes Brew Company](https://lakesbrewco.com/)and [Timothy Taylor’s](https://www.timothytaylorshop.co.uk/?&utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_term=timothy%20taylors&utm_campaign=UK+%7C+EN+%7C+GO+%7C+BRD+%7C+BMM+%7C+PURE+BRAND&mkwid=sErelZGy1_dc) on tap. It might just satisfy furious members of the Pub Liberation Front who believe that the serving of nice things to eat in such places is a bloody disgrace. What’s wrong with a packet of scampi fries, eh? (Nothing, as it happens.) Immediately to the right is the casual dining area, with its curving booths in red leather. Beyond that is the restaurant proper, a more austere space with raw wood panelling hung in turn with large charcoal landscapes. It’s a veritable riot of greys and blacks.

It all begins to make sense when you know more about the heritage of head chef [Nina Matsunaga](https://www.theblackbullsedbergh.co.uk/read-about-nina) who runs the pub with her partner, local-born [James Ratcliffe](https://www.theblackbullsedbergh.co.uk/read-about-james). Matsunaga was raised by Japanese parents in Dusseldorf, and brings those influences to bear on the ingredients from the surrounding hills and meadows, but in a thrillingly loose-limbed, lets-be-having-you sort of way. If it tastes good, it’s on. Recently Matsunaga was named a finalist in the chef of the year category of the Be Inclusive Hospitality awards, which celebrate diversity in the restaurant industry. Having eaten her food, I can say she very much deserves to be celebrated.

Start with that crispy Korean beef. The meat has been braised and then shredded. Tangles of it are pressed then wrapped in a delicate, wafting shiso leaf and deep fried in the lightest of lacy tempura batters. On the side is a sweet soy dipping sauce, filled with a very edible silt of black and white sesame seeds. I could do serious damage to a bucket of those. Rather more rugged is a take on hummus made with various kinds of black pea served with crackers packed full of caraway and sunflower seed.

Starters here in this back dining room are intricate and detailed, but never sacrifice flavour for cleverness. As with the beef, Herdwick lamb shoulder is braised until falling apart, Indian-spiced then pressed and served in a crisped Jenga block. It comes with an onion bhaji enriched with liver, alongside a quenelle of Greek yoghurt and a puréed lime pickle bold enough to make you flare your nostrils like a randy mare. It is the recognisably bold, thrusting flavours of the high street curry house, only in bespoke tailoring and spats. On another plate, a fat mackerel fillet loiters on a thick sauce of sweetened soy with a thump of green chilli heat. The heat-bubbled skin is layered with nori seaweed, wild garlic buds and a dot or two of caviar. It’s a fish dish that is unashamed of its funky pelagic depths. The mackerel is also perfectly cooked.

As is a small fillet of beef, sliced to display the party pink, with a slab of rib, first braised then crisped. Yes, I know; the same trick three times in one meal. But by God, it’s an effective trick. It comes with a big heap of properly strident green nam prik, a Thai chilli relish. I think a lot of things could benefit from having this nam prik as support act. Lightly crunchy edamame beans serve as ballast. After all this precision and poise, a plate of rugged, coiled rice noodles, topped by snowy peaks of monkfish, feels like a gear change. It comes with a hefty Asian broth, both sweet and salty with tiny shrimps. There are sprouting grains, Chinese greens, fronds of fresh coriander and, for texture, golden deep-fried noodles. Fresh chilli and lime give verve and literal zest to the dark umami flavours. It’s a messy bowlful, but a very good mess.

If anything, desserts take all this hoopla and boxset high drama to another level. We have a disc of perfectly set duck-egg custard. It’s so light it seems to be holding its shape merely through strength of character. There’s a gentle hand on the sweetness, which is balanced out by fragments of spicy gingerbread, echoing the legendary product from nearby Grasmere. (If you haven’t tried Grasmere gingerbread you have led only half a life.) What’s described as an apple terrine is a spectacularly well-made block of lightly cooked fruit, finely sliced and layered, with a drop-dead gorgeous cinnamon ice-cream, whorls of caramel cream and shards of honeycomb. It’s a privilege to be introduced to these desserts. Starters are around a tenner, and mains often slip north of £20. There is, however, a three-course lunch menu at £29.50 with only a slightly reduced choice.

It’s striking that none of this lofty culinary ambition comes with a side order of dreary, puckered formality. It’s still very much a pub. The service is jolly, as now are we. Lunch is finally coming to an end and, being this far north, dusk is already falling. The Sedbergh kids are sloping back to lessons, while their parents pick up the bill. The Black Bull might come across as a rather fancy pub. Certainly it has a very good chef in the kitchen. But what’s important is that it knows how to please not just one crowd, but a number of them. It has properly fed and watered all of us today. Just in different ways.