# Merchants 1688, Lancaster: ‘Seriously impressive food’ – restaurant review

Don’t be put off by the tacky website and dodgy decor, Merchants 1688 is a complete gem

[**Merchants 1688**](https://merchants1688.co.uk/)**, 29 Castle Hill, Lancaster LA1 1YN (01524 66466). Starters £7-£11, mains £12-£32, desserts £8-£9, wines from £21**

It’s tempting to describe Merchants 1688 in Lancaster as a lovely painting in a terrible frame, but that doesn’t quite do the job. The restaurant’s setting, that frame, is potentially gorgeous. It’s a trio of ancient, brick-lined arched cellars dating back, as the name suggests, to the 17th century. By the door, scribbled up on a blackboard, is a timeline, detailing their construction in 1688. By the mid-19th century, they were home to a wine and spirits merchants called Richard Hinde & Co who remained there until at least 1934. Intriguingly, it says the address was at the same time also the site of a temperance hotel. Presumably it occupied the building above, for those swearing off the booze stored in the cellars below. The whole site was listed in 1970, and in 1984 the subterranean space, reached via smoothed flagstone steps and arched doorways like you’re entering a hobbit house, was converted into a pub. The whole place is deliciously seasoned with history.

Inside those ancient stone arches the kitchen, led by chef Will Graham, is serving up seriously impressive food. It doesn’t just fall under the heading of “not bad” or “OK” or “somewhere to go if you’re hungry and you need to get out of the rain”. It’s cheek-slapping, belly-pleasing stuff from first to last, which cheerfully demonstrates lashings of professional technique while never losing sight of the imperative of appetite. But there is a problem. It’s a weird problem. I am aware that in describing this problem I risk sounding like a terrible, relentless snob. Then again, I’m a British restaurant critic. Perhaps I should just accept that ship sailed long ago.

Here it is. All that wonderful food is served in a space that feels like the kind of pub where the chips arrive in a mini chip-pan fryer and the gravy starts as a powder. (For sake of doubt the gravy here does not start as a powder.) It begins with an eye-achingly awful website. The site includes an earnest message apologising for the fact that you can’t come in wearing fancy dress, which meant I had to put away my Morticia Addams outfit. The gallery page has a “critical error” message, perhaps because the management haven’t bothered looking at their own website recently. The homepage carries a garish clip art advert for a New Year’s Eve event, which looks like it’s targeted at the cast of [*Towie*](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/the-only-way-is-essex).

The real issue is that when you arrive, the brightly lit bar space matches the website. It feels like the kind of place you would visit for nothing more ambitious than a pint and a panini. There’s a musty smell in the arches, which they’ve probably been trying to banish for years, and weird images of Venice hung on the walls, as if bought by the yard. So why did I go? Because the menu read well. Really well. Look, the snacks list includes a rarebit crumpet topped with braised beef. Doesn’t that sound like a good idea?

They don’t just write a good menu; they really can cook it, too. Among the starters for £9 is a generous puck of long-braised beef, in a friable tempura batter overcoat, which quickly breaks down into its luscious strands. It’s topped with grated fresh horseradish and surrounded by a deep well of proper sticky beef gravy, in which lie half-submerged enoki mushrooms. What makes the dish fly is a deep green dollop of a smooth, sharp and sweet gherkin ketchup floating through the beefiness. There are lots of elements to this dish, but they all come together, very smartly. Away from ideas involving cow, there’s a butch salad of roast pumpkin, with purple shovels of bitter chicory, pine nuts and heaps of whipped blue cheese with a pleasingly sharp cranberry dressing.

The main courses include their “72 hour” lamb hotpot. It arrives in its own ceramic pot, the surface layered with bronzed and crisped petals of sliced, herb-flecked potato. Crunch your way through those and you come to a sticky, dark mess of outrageously rich lamb stew. It is a bowl of time and attention. Clearly not one of those 72 hours has been wasted. With it comes a side of shredded pickled red cabbage, the ideal foil to this huge bash of umami. It’s proper value for £17.

The most expensive dish at £26, and reasonably so, is simply one of the best presentations of venison I’ve eaten in many years. Three generous slabs of haunch are crisply seared and an arterial red at the heart as they should be. There are cylinders of golden beetroot, treated like fondant potatoes, and with it a grainy venison “sausage” made with all the more diverse and offaly bits of the animals. What brings this together is a fabulous meaty jus, sweetened with elderberry and given the lightest lift by the addition of a certain smokiness. I announced to my companion, who is used to my grand speeches, that had I been served it on [*MasterChef: The Professionals*](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/nov/22/why-masterchef-the-professionals-is-the-cruellest-reality-tv-show), I would have proclaimed pompously that it was like being introduced to a major talent. The standard doesn’t slump at dessert. Here comes a pile of a foamy spiced pumpkin mousse hiding nuggets of candied pecan. Alongside is a maple and pecan financier. The sponge interior is soft and moist. The surface is sugared and crunchy. This kitchen can bake. Those dessert fireworks only mildly overshadow a palate-cleansing dome of an iced peach parfait with raspberry sorbet.

You will probably want to know that it isn’t just the place for gherkin ketchup and smoked elderberry jus. The lunchtime menu includes a burger, although it is made with dry-aged beef, raclette and a roast shallot mayo. There’s fish and chips, and a range of sandwiches including roast beef with watercress, or Appleby cheddar with chutney. They have 11 cask ales and craft beers, mostly drawn from regional breweries, and a serviceable wine list. The young and efficient front-of-house staff somehow juggle pulling those pints with fetching and carrying. Clearly there is someone leading the kitchen. It doesn’t quite feel the same way in the dining room. I’m not begging here for starched tablecloths and heel-clicking waiters. There’s just a strong sense that the management have no idea how good a restaurant they could have hidden away in these arches. My advice: if you’re at a loose end on New Year’s Eve and feeling flush, don’t be put off by the Towie clip art. Come here for that £80 tasting menu. You’ll be fed brilliantly.