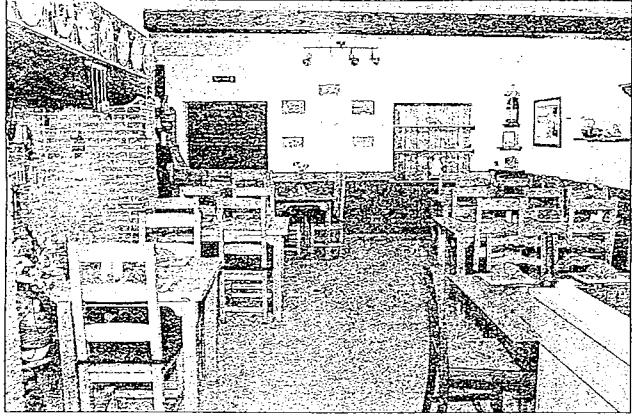


**The Insider** — *the man who knows about eating out*

# Novelli-approved Rag is so rich on flavours

**The Insider**  
**The Rag at Rawnsley**  
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 Rawnsley, Cannock,  
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Light and bright — on of the dining areas at The Rag Restaurant in Rawnsley, Cannock

The Rag Restaurant, Ironstone Road

IS IT me, or aren't you sick of those television advertisements telling us that Norwich Union is to change its name to Aviva?

And don't you long for the days when the confectionery shelves were stocked with Marathon and Opal Fruits, rather than Starburst and Snickers?

There is something that grates when big organisations try to tell us what we should call things.

Take for instance the old Raglan pub just outside Cannock. Some years ago a pub chain attempted to rename it as the New Inn, but found you can't change the habits of a lifetime, and locals continued to refer to it by its nickname "The Rag." So when present owners Mike and Stephanie Benniston took over in 2003, one of the first things they did was to rename it the Rag at Rawnsley.

The Rag at Rawnsley restaurant. If there were Michelin stars for alteration, this place would be home and dry. But a snappy name is not enough in today's economic climate, and restaurants like this have to offer something special if they are to survive.

**Passion**

Well, there is no shortage of pedigree. Last year celebrity chef Jean-Christophe Novelli called into the Rag to cook up a special lunch after Mike (Benny to his friends) and his chef Phillip Whittle won a national competition, and the Michelin man spoke in glowing terms about the owner's passion for food.

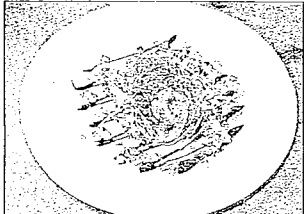
"I think Mike definitely has an attitude with much positivity, he is very inspiring," said Novelli.

The Rag has come highly recommended by several Express & Star readers. Solvi was the first to suggest it was worth a visit, and another reader from Hednesford compared it to The Ritz. Last, but not least, Lee Davies was so impressed he e-mailed me twice: "You must go and try the food there."

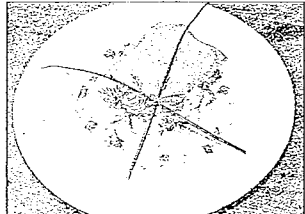
It was certainly busy on the Tuesday evening that we called in. It is a fairly remote location, and the packed car park suggested most people had driven.

The owners clearly have a sense of humour, demonstrated by the numerous metal plates on display at the small bar in the lounge. "Never mind the dog, beware of the mother-in-law," is the warning on one, while a poster declares "I'm going to have a nervous breakdown - I've earned it."

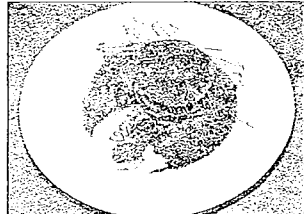
There is a good choice of ales, with Ansell's Mild, London Pride and Black Sheep bitter all on offer alongside the usual products of the brewing giants. With its level car park and wide walkways it appears to be reason-



Squid with garlic and red pepper dressing



Mille feuille of lobster and monkfish



Dessert - caramelised banana pancake

**What else is included on the Rag?**

<p><b>Starters</b>                  Duck and wild mushroom ravioli on dressed rocket with a honey roasted garlic and pine nut dressing £4.75                  Rustic farmhouse pate with toasted soda bread, home-made piccalilli and blackcurrant onion pickle £4.95                  Backfin white crab cakes with rocket leaves, and a tomato, crab and basil dressing £5.75</p>	<p><b>Main courses (all served with a selection of fresh vegetables with a choice of potatoes or home-made chips)</b>                  Fillet steak wrapped in local cured streaky bacon topped with Roquefort cheese served on a large flat mushroom with a red wine sauce £18.50                  Novelli's organic salmon fillet cooked in Carlsberg Export with fennel shallots and crayfish cream £13.50</p>	<p>Noisettes of lamb with a leek and orange stuffing and a minted hollandaise sauce £14.95                  Pork fillet stuffed with prunes and black pudding on a tattie scone, with an apple, white wine and chervil sauce £13.50  <b>Desserts (all £3.50)</b>                  Apricot and mango delicie                  Baked vanilla cheese-cake                  Sherry trifle</p>
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ably wheelchair friendly, although it would probably be advisable to call first to check.

The restaurant area is attractively light and bright, and decorated in a stylish two-tone look, the lower half being deep red, matching the smart, satin-effect curtains, and the upper walls freshly painted in cream. The light wood finish of the tables was continued nicely with the dado rail and picture frames, and the tasteful vase of well-preserved carnations on each table is a nice touch. It was just a shame that we were sat right in front of a large uPVC fire door, which did mar the ambience somewhat, although I suspect in the event of a fire I would be grateful for it.

It was also nice to see some good quality cutlery, a pleasant change from the battered implements we are all to often expected to

utilise. Novelli's influence was evident, not just from the photographs on the wall, but also from the menu which includes options such as Novelli's organic salmon fillet cooked in Carlsberg Export. Most of the dishes are house specialities, with some seeming quite exotic, but there are options for the more conservative palate, and the friendly staff seem willing to adapt the menu to the customer's requirements.

For example, I quite fancied the daub of beef on horseradish mash, but was not so keen on the Provençal sauce, but the waitress was quite happy to arrange for it to come served in the crushed black pepper sauce. My dining partner went for the fillet steak in brandy and wild mushroom sauce which, while not cheap, was reasonably priced at £16.95.

While we were waiting for the main courses, we were given with some piping hot, freshly-baked bread, although it would have been nice to have had a bit more butter.

I must confess that I was not entirely sure what a daub or beef was, it turned out it is another Novelli speciality, and is essentially braised beef that has been marinated before being served on the bed of potato. It was an enjoyable experience, lovingly cooked and served with an excellent sauce.

My companion was equally pleased with the fillet steak - a sentiment echoed by myself having sampled a bit of it - and the meals were accompanied by generous helpings of very good vegetables, potatoes and chips, the latter being worthy of special mention, being golden, crispy and hand-cut. It's just a shame I could not manage more of them.

In truth, by the time I had finished the main course, I had already indulged far too much to want a dessert, but in the name of duty I forced myself to try the baked vanilla cheesecake, something I would certainly recommend, representing excellent value at just £3.50.

The total bill came to £40.80, which I think was very good value for food which meets Mr Novelli's approval, and the portions were certainly generous.

In fact, they were probably a little too generous, and as I hauled my newly expanded stomach back towards the car, it was clear that I had been enjoying myself a little more than was good for me.

I dunno. The things I do for you readers.