

MY TOP FIVE

Kim Bailey with his favourite places to celebrate a festival winner



»The Beehive, Montpellier Villas

For a big night, start at this cracking traditional pub (*below*). Have a couple of pints of local real ale or West Country cider, then wander (if possible) down to Harry Cooks, formerly known as the Irish Bar. It's fun and noisy, and I should know as we have our annual staff party here, last year with a Christmas jumpers dress code. There was a band playing and although I left before drinks started to take effect, I believe our jockey David Bass took over the drummer's position and set the night alight.

»No 38 The Park

In more sophisticated vein, take over No 38 and fill it with all your best mates and hangers-on who love a party. It's less a bed and breakfast, more an elegant Cheltenham town house that's perfect for a bespoke private party to celebrate a good day at the races. Be grand, bring in your own chef for the night, enjoy comfy rooms – just waiting for that top-drawer owner to go for it.

»No 131, Promenade

Another number, both run by the same team. No 131 is 'the Cotswolds' own hotel hipsville' according to the Evening Standard, with its downstairs Crazy Eights cocktail bar. The restaurant is good and friendly and drinks in the front garden, weather permitting, is the perfect way to show off your trophy. Not for the shy and retiring.

»KIBOUushi, Regent Street

I love Japanese food so I head to this little basement restaurant all too often, winner or not. Their noodles entice the local Japanese community through the doors, and fresh, handmade sushi arrives on either a miniature boat or bridge. A quiet supper can be followed by a rowdy disco until the early hours, 20 yards down the street at the 21 Club, where the owner Richard Davies, a racing fanatic and racehorse owner, helps the party along.

»Prithvi, Bath Road

'Earth or Mother Earth, in the ancient Sanskrit', says the blurb – an award-winning Indian restaurant for the quiet and unassuming racegoer who wants to relax and enjoy their Cheltenham win without the glare of a big party. Trust me (you should always worry when a racehorse trainer says that!), the owner Jay Rahman knows his spices and his wines. Be brave and let him choose which country you drink from with your various courses – you won't be disappointed.



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RACING POST

Cheltmania rolls on as Russell and Casey clash



Richard Forristal sees two giants of the weighing room lock horns at a Cheltenham preview night in Waterford on Thursday

IF CHELTENHAM Festival previews are racing's own niche WWE-style series, the annual Ladbrokes-backed event in the Woodlands Hotel on the outskirts of Waterford city is WrestleMania. Big names, bold statements and bawdy below-the-belt hits have the packed amphitheatre in a boisterous frenzy.

For Hulk Hogan, The Undertaker, The Ultimate Warrior and Randy Savage, read Davy Russell, John Francome, David Casey and Katie Walsh. In total, 11 heavyweights fill the canvas, rendering MC Brian Gleeson practically superfluous. Gleeson throws the ball in and lets them at it.

After establishing a degree of consensus that the Supreme Novices' Hurdle looks an usually weak renewal, the Arkle got the blood up. No one has a bad word to say about Altior, but Russell thinks that "it's mad running Yorkhill in the JLT" because he races too keenly.

"It's a glorified Grade 2 – it's not really a Grade 1," he adds of the longer event. "I think Yorkhill is a serious horse, but Ruby Walsh got off him at Cheltenham last year and said he'd win the Arkle with his mouth open. Now, all of a sudden, he's a JLT horse – that's my worry. It's the wrong race for him."

Casey defends the plan by stating that the JLT will be easier to win, and suggests Russell should buy Yorkhill and run him in the Arkle if it bothers him so much.

"You'd be able to afford him after selling all that land in Cork," he advises his former colleague. "Not a blade of grass," is Russell's terse response. "Sure, didn't I see 200 houses built on it," Casey counters.

"That's the next-door neighbour's," Russell deadpans, and the crowd is in raptures.

Turf Club handicapper Noel O'Brien laments the fact the expanded festival programme facilitates these issues. "It has devalued a lot of the championship races, and it's sad that Yorkhill won't take on Altior," he says.

"It is a pity that the good horses don't always clash and don't run in the races that suit them best. We have missed an awful lot of good clashes over the years at the festival between real top horses."

Mick Fitzgerald also believes that Yorkhill will be vulnerable in the JLT because Walsh will need to "manhandle" him, something Russell



All smiles: Katie Walsh shares a joke on the panel at Woodlands Hotel

suggestively proposes 'Fitzzy' did plenty of himself in the wee small hours at Cheltenham.

"A long time ago now, Davy," Fitzgerald retorts.

Russell is great value at these gigs, although he is on the receiving end of a few barbs himself here. Henry de Bromhead bemoans his waiting tactics on Ordinary World in the Arkle two weeks ahead of the event, and Francome tells him he sits so far back that he would keep Yorkhill's rear end down. Francome can't have Yorkhill at all.

After declaring that Presenting Percy had been handicapped out of contention, Russell is quizzed about Mall Dini's chance in the Kim Muir.

"He has been very, very disappointing this season – we thought he'd win a Grade 1 over fences," he tells us of Pat Kelly's 2015 Pertemps hero.

"He was disappointing last year until he went to Cheltenham as well," Casey suggests. "No, he won last season," comes the reply. "But sure if he won, you'd be saying he had no chance, like Presenting Percy," Casey volleys. "Why hasn't he won?"

"Because he hasn't been able," Russell says. "Oh, right – a likely story!" Casey responds, before Russell seems to let his guard down.

"As Katie has said, this is a very, very bad race – it wouldn't surprise me if he ran well," he says, adding that Kelly is

WHAT THEY SAID

"Not one of them has run to a Timeform figure good enough to win the last five renewals"

»Jim McGrath condemns the Supreme Novices' Hurdle market leaders

"He was in last year and has a pain in his arse from going around Thurles in schooling hurdles"

»Melon won't want for hurdling practice according to David Casey

"You can't remount any more but he could have fallen a couple of times in the past and still won"

»John Francome reckons Altior will simply be far too good for his Racing Post Arkle Trophy rivals

"I'm surprised Death Duty is not running in the Neptune. I think he's the best novice hurdler either side of the water and I'd be afraid three miles might be too far for him"

»Davy Russell thinks connections are asking too much of Death Duty

"It has devalued a lot of the championship races, and it's sad that Yorkhill won't be taking on Altior"

»Senior Turf Club handicapper Noel O'Brien doesn't agree with the expansion of the festival programme

"You've never backed a horse in your life, because if you think that Bristol De Mai is going to win the Gold Cup, you'd be broke – and you are not broke!"

»Russell derides Francome's outside fancy in the big race

a shrewd man, which everyone in the room takes as the final stamp of approval for Mall Dini's chance.

"What I can't understand is how Blazer beat Mall Dini but is rated lower than him," Russell ponders later. "Blazer is the best handicapped Irish horse going to England."

Without a hint of irony, Casey responds of Mullins' JP McManus-owned gelding: "Blazer has been very disappointing. He has been beaten in his three runs over fences, and we thought he'd be a Grade 1 horse this year."

The two Davids have several crowd-pleasing tete-a-tetes, but they agree that Native River's form isn't nearly good enough to win a Gold Cup. "He beat Raz De Maree a length and a half," Casey says condemningly. "I'd beat Raz De Maree a length and a half myself."

Walsh, who declares Tony Martin's Long Call a certainty in the Fred Winter, is of a similar mind.

Oliver Sherwood speaks for the majority on the panel when he wonders if Cue Card missed his chance last year, although he is fond of Native River, with Jim McGrath keen on Djakadam.

De Bromhead, gamely, recommends his own Champagne West for the Gold Cup, but Djakadam shades the verdict with five votes to Native River's four, while Sizing John is the sponsor's Hayley O'Connor's pick.

Time will tell if any gems have been proffered, but, on the issue of entertainment, this contest has triumphed once again. Cheltmania rolls on relentlessly.

THE PANEL'S PICKS

»Mick Fitzgerald
Empire Of Dirt
(Ryanair Chase)

»Noel O'Brien
Vroum Vroum Mag
(OLBG Mares' Hurdle)

»David Casey
Augusta Kate
(Albert Bartlett Novices' Hurdle)

»Katie Walsh
Let's Dance
(Trull House Stud Mares' Novices' Hurdle)

»Hayley O'Connor
Un De Sceaux
(Ryanair Chase)

»Davy Russell
Uxizandre
(Ryanair Chase)

»Jim McGrath
Beware The Bear
(JT McNamara National Hunt Chase)

»Henry de Bromhead
Monalee (each-way)
(Neptune Investment or Albert Bartlett Novices' Hurdle)

»Oliver Sherwood
Dino Velvet (each-way)
(Fred Winter Juvenile Handicap Hurdle)

»Jack Kennedy
Death Duty
(Albert Bartlett Novices' Hurdle)

»John Francome
Moon Racer
(Sky Bet Supreme Novices' Hurdle)

»Brian Gleeson
Monalee
(Neptune Investment or Albert Bartlett Novices' Hurdle)

