

JUST HOW AN OLD INN SHOULD BE ...

So says the Daily Telegraph, and who am I to argue? The Old Black Lion in Hay-on-Wye is one of those charming restaurants where you instantly feel at home, and one you will keep heading back to, not least because of the superb, delicious food.

This atmospheric 17th century inn is not in the town centre – not a bad thing from my point of view – but close by Lion Gate, one of the original entrances to the old walled town, it oozes rustic charm and warmth helped in no small part, by an excellent front of house team. We ate in the oak timbered bar which has just the right amount of scrubbed pine tables, seating 45 to keep things pleasantly intimate.

The Inn was taken over by Dolan Leighton last August with the stated aim of providing a warm welcome, good food, and well kept beer and wine – and how she has succeeded. Mind you, she did inherit a fine team of chefs, headed by Peter Bridges who has been there for nine years.

All this preamble is keeping me away from the superb menu, but I do want to set everything in context – eating out should be an all encompassing experience, and our evening at the inn was exactly that – a labour of love by all the staff, far removed from the style over substance philosophy of many restaurants.

There was a great selection of starters, and you could argue that I was a little unadventurous in choosing Fresh Atlantic Prawns on dressed Rose Marie Dressing, but I assure you the prawns were plump and fresh and the dressing piquant and refreshing. My wife had Roast Smoked Salmon with organic leaves and fresh horseradish potato salad – a meaty salmon complemented by a wonderful afterburn from the fresh horseradish.

For main course I settled for Baked Halibut on Buttered Spinach with a Nutmeg and Dill Cream Sauce – a superb virgin white piece of flaky halibut with perfectly cooked spinach and a delicious smooth sauce. The fish was accompanied by perfect Dauphinoise potatoes and a selection of flawless, crunchy, caramelised baked vegetables.

Apart from the main menu selection there is also an extensive bar ‘favourites’ board from which my wife chose Moroccan Lamb with an Apricot and Fig Compote and cous cous. The lamb was melt in the mouth tender, and I don’t usually like cous cous – but I do now.

We were both stuffed by now, but you have to leave room for a pud, don’t you? Rhubarb Panacotta with fresh rhubarb and a Marmalade and Grand Marnier Bread and Butter Pudding with fresh pouring cream. The panacotto was creamy, distinctly vanilla sweet and without doubt, the finest I have ever tasted, complemented beautifully by a delicately tart rhubarb. I was allowed a mere spoonful of the Bread and Butter Pud, simply because my wife enjoyed it so much.

We finished with a strong, freshly brewed coffee and some delightful home made dark orange truffles.

There is a well informed wine list of some 48 wines – chosen carefully and with obvious affection for good wines, rather than the blanket coverage often seen in restaurants where the right mix of good food and fine wines is simply not understood.

The Old Black Lion must be purring contently in his lair – he is in safe hands. Chef and his team have an excellent understanding of flavours and precise accuracy with their seasoning – our food was a perfect example of how to do simple things well without over complication. Service is relaxed, friendly and unfussy, but with a depth of experience, and the surroundings are conducive to a great night out.

In short, The Old Black Lion is set to become one of our favourite haunts. Indeed, we have already booked a table to celebrate a good friend's birthday later this month.

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