

## Border Style: Restaurant Review – Castle House, Hereford

# Philippe Boucheron takes Lunch on the Lawn at the Castle House Hotel, Hereford.

A busy June morning in Hereford finalising arrangements for a series of Pol Roger Champagne Master Classes finished around noon. Lunch was the next order of the day, the hot sun suggested an *al fresco* opportunity and the stylish Castle House Hotel provided the solution.

Eschewing the smart restaurant with its sophisticated piano bar, we swept to the lawn and found a splendid table in the garden overlooking the lake – or is it part of the old castle moat? The first duty was to rustle up a couple of glasses of Grand Cru champagne, not Pol Roger but a crisp, biscuity Bouzy brut from André Clouet (£7) and a charming rosé from Michel Arnould's vineyards at Verzenay (£7.50). Suitably fortified we could now get down to making decisions –salads to start but as we were in Hereford it had to be beef.

Madame 'B' settled for the Castle House's 'Salad of the Season' (£4) followed by Pan-fried Calves Liver and Bacon on a butter mash with a baby onion sauce (£15). A melody of asparagus, mixed leaves and sliced radices with a few shreds of Parmesan, combined to make a most refreshing starter. The liver was so tender that you could cut it with a fork, and packed with flavour.

I had my sights on the Rib Eye of Beef (£15) which I decided to precede with a sophisticated salad of asparagus, smoked salmon and poached egg with an Hollandaise sauce. Cooked to preserve their 'bite', the asparagus set off the excellent smoked salmon, while the warm egg added its own sense of well-being. However, it was the perfect Hollandaise that won my admiration. My beef, pink and rare as requested, was accompanied by a flat mushroom and some roasted vine tomatoes. Although the menu proudly boasted Home Cut Chips – these are strictly forbidden by my diet – but I asked the helpful waiter to apologise to the kitchen and just give me a couple. The well-flavoured beef was excellently balanced by the tomatoes and mushroom. There were, as requested, two chips on my plate – just one was sufficient to tell me that these were masterful fingers of the noble tuba, and my self-restraint at leaving its partner on the plate astonished Madame B.

A couple of glasses of wine – a well-balanced Gargenega from Italy (£3.95) partnered the Calves Liver while young un-oaked Spaniard (£3.75), a blend of Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot added its rich, deep red fruit tones to my beef.

During the strictures of my regime Madame B has been promoted to chief dessert taster. It has to be admitted that she doesn't object, but I still have a spare spoon, just in case! She ordered a Raspberry Crème Brulée, with white chocolate and caramelised almonds accompanied by a Raspberry Ice (£6). This was a masterpiece, a really thick

caramelised topping over a smooth, fruity raspberry cream, while the ice cream was in the words of a certain Mr Michael Winner, 'historic'. And yes, I did use the spare spoon, but most sparingly.

The Castle House is indeed fortunate to have Claire Nicholls in charge of the kitchens. She is a talented chef whose great skill is taking fresh local produce and allowing their flavours to burst through to the delight of her customers. I must return one evening to experience her Tasting Menu (£49)

The coffee was hot, freshly brewed and tangy, without a trace of the bitterness that comes from brewing inferior blends on the solara system – just topping up the urn as it runs down! I understand that the hotel now belongs to a local businessman and farmer, David Watkins – no wonder the beef was so good! – and he is to be congratulated on keeping the flag of great British dining flying so boldly through these difficult times.

## **The Castle House Hotel**

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