A Picture-Perfect COUNTRY PUB

NATALIE PRIOR VISITS THE HOWARD ARMS AT ILMINGTON

The Howard Arms at Ilmington

The bar

If you were to picture the perfect country pub you'd probably imagine a cosy bar with a log fire, fine wines and real ales, delicious food served by friendly staff and a stylish bedroom to retire to at the end of the evening.

The Howard Arms at Ilmington fits the bill perfectly. Just a short drive from the upmarket north Cotswolds market town of Chipping Campden, this picture-postcard gastro pub with rooms overlooks the village green in a peaceful backwater less than 10 miles from Stratford-upon-Avon.

The former Good Pub Guide Pub of the Year, built during Shakespeare's time, recently re-opened under new management following a major refurbishment.

Keen to keep this integral part of the village alive and thriving, two local families took on the business late last year after its fortunes began to wane.

In addition to investing in substantial renovations, the new owners have brought in an award-winning chef, Gavin Rufus, who has created a menu which combines inventive dishes with updated versions of the Howard Arms' classics.

The restaurant has won five stars and one rosette from the AA with its varied menu using ingredients from local suppliers.

Having been seated in the cosy restaurant which overlooks the village green, my husband and I had a chance to browse the choices. There were plenty of hearty starters such as mushroom, pearl barley and tarragon soup; smoked mackerel and spinach tart with horseradish and chive mayonnaise; and spiced lamb kofta kebab with red pepper salsa, tzatziki and herb pitta bread.

We opted to head straight for the main course

One of the stylish bedrooms

and I was suitably impressed by my choice of butternut squash, broccoli and St Thom goat's cheese crumble served with new potatoes and seasonal vegetables which was substantial and full of flavour. My other half really enjoyed the haddock and chips coated in a light and crispy beer batter served with peas and tangy, homemade tartare sauce. We decided to share some homemade focaccia topped with mozzarella and served with a balsamic and pesto oils which was delicious.

Other main courses included roast pork fillet wrapped in parma ham with sweet potato puree and shiitake mushrooms, kale, cherry apples and a jus; and pan-fried fillet of Loch Duart salmon, crushed new potatoes, kale, salsify and chive cream veloute.

Our appetites were sufficiently whetted to sample something sweet. Options included sticky toffee pudding with butterscotch sauce and clotted cream; and rich, dark chocolate tart with hazelnut ice cream. I couldn't resist the baked marmalade cheesecake with cinnamon and clementine compote which was just as creamy, sweet and sharp as I'd hoped. My other half went for the blackberry and apple crumble with proper custard and, safe to say, he loved it.

In addition to the delightful bar and restaurant, the Howard Arms has eight bedrooms. All are individually decorated with plenty of character provided by historic oak beams and sloping ceilings, as well as antique furnishings such as four-poster beds and hand-picked paintings.

Particular attention has been paid to ensuring a good night's sleep, with large beds offering hand-stitched and sprung mattresses. There are plenty of modern comforts too, with flat-screen smart TVs and luxury toiletries. We awoke next morning to a hearty breakfast with plenty of options for those with smaller or larger appetites – and everything was just as well-crafted as our evening meal had been.

To find out more, visit howardarms.com.

Baked marmalade cheesecake with cinnamon and clementine compote

The view of the bar from the dining room

The dining room

THE HOWARD ARMS' BAKEWELL TART

INGREDIENTS

For the pastry

- 300g/10½oz plain flour, plus extra for dusting
- 125g/4oz cold unsalted butter, cut into cubes
- 30g/1oz sugar
- 2 free-range eggs
- 2 tbsp milk (optional)

For the filling

- 225g/8oz unsalted butter, softened
- 225g/8oz caster sugar
- 225g/8oz ground almonds
- 3 free-range eggs
- 1 lemon, finely grated zest only
- 50g/2oz plain flour
- 1 jar raspberry jam
- flaked almonds, for sprinkling

METHOD

1 For the pastry, place the flour, butter and sugar into a food processor and pulse until the mixture resembles breadcrumbs. Add one of the eggs and pulse until the mixture comes together to form a rough dough. If the dough is too dry, add a bit of milk. Shape the dough into a ball and wrap in cling film. Chill in the fridge for 20 minutes.

2. Unwrap the dough and discard the cling film. Turn the dough out onto a floured work surface and roll out until large enough to line a 30x20cm/12x8in cake tin. Line the tin with the pastry, then place into the fridge to chill for a further 30 minutes.

3. Preheat the oven to 200C/400F/Gas 6.

4. Line the chilled tart case with a sheet of greaseproof paper and fill with baking beans. Bake for 15-20 minutes, or until the pastry is lightly golden-brown.

5. Remove the paper and beans and brush the pastry all over with the remaining beaten egg. Return the pastry to the oven for a further five minutes, until golden-brown. Remove the pastry from the oven and turn the oven temperature down to 180C/365F/Gas 4.

6. For the filling, beat the butter and sugar together in a bowl until pale and fluffy.

7. Mix in the ground almonds, then crack in the eggs one at a time, beating well between each addition until smooth and creamy. Fold in the lemon zest and the flour.

8. Spread some of the raspberry jam generously across the base of the pastry, leaving a 2.5cm/1in gap around the edge.

9. Spread the filling mixture over the jam and sprinkle over the flaked almonds.

10. Bake the tart for 20 minutes, or until the filling is set and golden-brown. Allow to cool in the tin before serving.