

# The View review

*Lip-smacking, palate-pleasing, tastebud-zapping – Rosie Staal enjoys her meal and discovers an inspiring chef*



Owners Keith Pullen and Tracey Docwra with ace chef Ken Briercliffe

**Cellar's at Fairlawn House • 42 High Street • Amesbury • Wiltshire • SP4 7DL  
01980 622103 • www.fairlawnhouse.co.uk**

Think of a hotel dining room and the image that springs to mind sets the senses in motion. There's the smell: fish, usually, and strong enough to block the nostrils. Sound: knives and forks on heavy china, the pad-pad of a waitress's feet on heavy carpet, and a few whispers in the midst of a heavy silence. Sight: dusty silk flowers, dusty curtains, a few dusty diners. Taste: the tongue set a-quiver with too much salt, or, all flavour absent, the tongue left helplessly searching for something to identify what it was that's just left the fork. Feel: panic – how soon can I get out of here?

Not good. Awful image, bad memories. But that was then (probably Guildford, circa 1976, if I'm honest) and this is now, thank heavens, and here am I, with D, in the delightful dining room of Fairlawn House. Everything is in complete contrast with that unfortunate lingering image of hotel dining.

What we find ourselves in at the Fairlawn is the cellar of the handsome Georgian building, hence the name Cellar's (though the need for an apostrophe is a mystery). Not a fusty, dusty drape in sight and, thanks to the popularity of the venue, no deathly hush either, but a good buzz of chatter among our fellow diners.

The Fairlawn, a successful 13-bedroom Grade II listed hotel, was taken over last

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summer by co-owners Tracey Docwra and Keith Pullen, who used to run a B&B in Surrey. They have hardly paused for breath since.

As well as putting together plans for adding suites and refurbishing rooms, they have responded to requests from hotel guests and locals by opening the restaurant, hitherto used only for breakfast, as an evening dining room. Its runaway success has delighted them – and brought praise for their chef, Ken Briercliffe, who was just pondering retirement when the call came to leave the Lake District and head south.

What a great signing he has proved to be. Since Cellar's opened in September, Ken has wowed diners with his inspired cooking. He likes to use local suppliers wherever possible, and these include Amesbury butcher Clive Kingman – 'a top man', he says.

Our meal is 'top' too. Absolutely top. I'd say the menu of three starters, six mains and three puddings offers good British food with Mediterranean influences.

This is what we have: smoked salmon and crayfish in a lettuce 'boat' with lime and mayonnaise (we both appreciate this fresh, lively starter that primes the tastebuds); breast of local pheasant on a pâté crouton with wild mushrooms and Madeira sauce (D enjoys it immensely, but his jury is divided on the strong pâté); pan-fried sailfish with a lemon and coriander salsa (mine, all mine, and I am bowled over by how perfectly it is cooked, crisp of skin but with flavour and moistness intact, and with the salsa adding a terrific zap); carrot and lemon cake with a mixed fruit

compote (a big hit with D, who remains in a swoon for some time).

With our main courses we share a dish of potato dauphinoise and a dish of thin green beans, red cabbage, broccoli and carrots, every component cooked just as we like it, so there is nothing mushy and disappointing but nothing crunchy and challenging, either. Like the whole meal, these are cooked with flair, care and confidence.

Two waitresses look after us – Toni, who has worked here since Cellar's opened, and Mia, who is just learning the ropes. They are friendly, full of smiles and efficiency, and a credit to Keith and Tracey. 'We're lucky they're ours,' Keith admits. 'If I saw them and they were working for someone else, I'd have to poach them.'

While D douses his post-pudding swoon with a good cup of coffee, I come up with a profound observation: 'You know, it's all a matter of good taste. You can see the Fairlawn's got it, Ken's very obviously got it, and now we're lucky enough to have had some of it too. We may need to come back for another fix.' ▼

**Our meal for two, without drinks, came to £35**



**Pheasant breast with wild mushrooms and Madeira sauce**

