

The View review

Rosemary Staal
visits an old pub in a new guise



Chilworth Arms • Chilworth • Southampton • SO16 7JZ • 023 8076 6247
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This is the sort of place you spot as you drive past, see the lights and the activity through the windows, note the busy car park and think: 'Wow, that's popular – I bet it would be a nice place to stop and eat.'

Tonight, happily, we're not driving past but pulling in to the car park and striking lucky with a space. D remembers the large old building when it was The Clump, a landmark pub that even boasted its own football team. For the past 18 months, though, The Clump has made way for something sporting an altogether different strip for its role in a whole new ball game.

A mega-bucks investment has turned it into the far more grand-sounding Chilworth Arms, which eschews the description of 'gastropub' for the more pretentious label of Country Pub and Eating House, which indeed is exactly what it is. The pub side of it is a large bar and comfortable sitting area, where drinking and eating are enjoyed in informal surroundings, while the more serious eating side has 90 covers and waitress service.



We're here on serious eating business so it's off to the left we go and into the care of Jen, our cheery waitress. Like her colleagues, she wears jeans and black company T-shirt.

We're seated at a square table quite close to a circular central log fire that is blazing merrily behind a double-sided glass screen. It could be mesmerising, were it not for the counter attraction of the menu, which is so large that when I pick it up it blocks out the fire. That's fine because I need to concentrate. I can't be staring at crackling logs when I need to be choosing. There is an astonishing array of dishes under various headings, starting with 'Sharing Plates' of tasters on a Greek, Italian or Spanish theme, and progressing through 'Little Dishes' (such as soup, bruschetta, crab cakes and the like), 'Leaves' (£10-ish dishes of duck, salmon, chicken or mozzarella), and taking in many different pizzas and pastas, to end up with 'Stove/Grill/Rotisserie' featuring more elaborate meat dishes and a veggie choice.

But that's not all. At the foot of the menu we find 'Starches/Greens', with salad or veg side dishes that include Belgian frites and mayo – something to get D's pulse racing in eager anticipation. Fortunately, by the time we've debated and dithered our way through that lot, told Jen that we need another couple of minutes (minutes? hours more like) and then tackled the Specials menu, that tempting dish of Belgian frites is forgotten.

My task isn't made any easier by the fact I keep misreading things. What are 'fried pizzas, I wonder? Then I realise it actually says 'fired pizzas'. Likewise the 'scared tuna carpaccio', which probably was pretty

frightened when it was seared. I decide to have that, and it's delicious, with its little topknot of ginger slivers (no, not silvers). D starts with a dish that would, at home, constitute a main meal of generous proportions: smoked haddock on a bed of spinach, with a poached egg on top, the whole thing in a sauce almost as cheesy as his happy grin of satisfaction.

We both choose from the specials menu for our main course: crayfish, spring onion and white wine risotto for me and chargrilled pork lion (it really does say 'lion', it isn't my eyes this time) in a pink peppercorn sauce with roasted rosemary potatoes for D. I would say that he roars his approval of the lion, but in fact he merely licks his lips and declares it quite perfect.

The puddings menu is more modest: just five sweet dishes and one cheese and biscuits. I can't resist the almond amaretti ice-cream and I predict correctly what D is going to have – sticky ginger and toffee pudding with a lime sauce.

Although the place is really buzzing, with dishes emerging from the kitchen in a steady flow, I note that when someone on the table nearest ours explains to Jen that she is lactose intolerant, she is reassured that that won't be a problem at all. Very soon, she is tucking in to a hearty meal with as much confidence and enjoyment as the rest of her group.

The Chilworth Arms passes the 'How to win over customers and keep them' test with flying colours.

Our three-course meal, excluding wine: £48.50 ▼