

The View review



Rosemary Staal *is beguiled by a French culinary genius*

Clos du Marquis (at the Leckford Hutt) • London Road • Stockbridge • Hants • 01264 810738 • closdumarquis.co.uk

We pull up in the car park and walk across to the entrance of what looks like a characterful roadside pub. The chilly night air tries to wrap itself around us so we quicken our step and just catch the enticing aroma of woodsmoke spiralling from a chimney.

As we walk in we are welcomed by Glanis Marquis, who owns this former landmark pub turned restaurant with her French husband Germain. At our fireside seats in the lounge area we are brought pre-dinner drinks by Grant, who, like Glanis, is South African.

This is quite a cosmopolitan outpost, out here in the Hampshire countryside. We learn that the two waitresses, smiling models of unobtrusive efficiency, are French, Germain's cooks are South African, French and Portuguese and the cleaner is Polish.

Our fellow diners, mind you, seem to be from around these parts, although two men sharing a table have come from up north (Basingstoke, to be precise) where they are staying on business.

The catchment area for what many still think of as the Leckford Hutt, a pub since the 18th century on the London road three miles out of Stockbridge, includes Southampton, Salisbury, Bournemouth and Newbury. Little wonder that it attracted Germain and Glanis as a potential business venture when they arrived in England in 2004 after 30-plus years in Johannesburg.

Life there had turned sour through crime and violence and they wanted to settle in England, so where better than this lovely part of a county that boasts two of the things Germain is passion about: country sports and cricket.

Yes, here is a Parisian who speaks excellent English, loves everything about England and dislikes the French. He left France as a teenager

and trained in hotel management in Germany before going to work in South Africa. Then he decided he wanted to learn how to cook, so he nipped back to Paris for two or three years and then scuttled back to Johannesburg where he opened the city's first French restaurant. It was a rip-roaring success.

So now he's here, among us, treating us to his culinary genius and establishing the Clos du Marquis as the place to go for fine French food.

What would D and I think of it, two heathens who, *quel horreur*, have some finely honed prejudices against French food?

Germain doesn't know he has such a challenge on his hands, poor man. But he must be used to dealing with misconceptions, since he's living proof of one that's been turned on its head: a Parisian who is funny, friendly – and helpful. He sorts me out as I struggle to choose, presumably just resisting the desire to say 'Leave it to me, dear.' I do, once I've made the hideous admission to him that I don't eat meat. He doesn't faint, quite.

So while I float my way through the tastiest and most tender pan-fried scallops in the history of the universe, and a truly beautiful fillet of turbot topped with a mousse of scallops, D maintains some honour and credibility by choosing fillet of beef with morels sauce to follow his monkfish foie gras on a bed of crab meat. He too is enthusing along similar lines to me, so that a quiet chorus of 'best ever' and 'this is out of this world' rises from our corner of the restaurant.

The vegetables appear as little works of art, so that it seems almost a shame to stick a fork in, let alone eat them. But we do, and are well rewarded, the darioles of baby spinach and butternut squash being especially wonderful.

Puddings are obviously going to be terrific as well, so we don't resist. D chooses an exquisite bavarois of orange and I go for broke diet-wise by opting for a quite sublime brandy and date pudding 'from the Huguenots'.

Coffee, wouldn't you know it, is the best espresso I have ever had in this country – so good, in fact, that I have a second cup. It perfectly rounds off an evening that has been memorable in so many ways: a meal not just fit for kings, I am sure, but for fussy editors, too.

How grateful we are to the French for making Germain Marquis an anglophile. Their loss is our gain, *bien sur*.

*** Our three-course dinner for two, without wine: £74 V**

