

The View review

Annie Bullen *finds food fit for angels*



Howard's House • Teffont Evias • Salisbury • Wiltshire • SP3 5RJ
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If there is a hell, there has to be a heaven and we found it in the deep heart of Wiltshire on a sunny June day. Hell was inching along the traffic-packed A303. Things improved as we turned off to Wilton, with its incongruous but glorious Italianate church, and became decidedly better along the leafy reaches of the Nadder Valley.

We were heading for Howard's House in Teffont Evias, where chef Nick Wentworth reigns in the kitchen and Noële Thompson, his mother-in-law, runs a pretty heavenly establishment.

The tiny River Teff runs alongside the narrow road past the ancient church (embellished with an enormous cathedral-like spire by those dissatisfied Victorians). The manor house is now divided into separate establishments but both are built with mellow Chilmark stone. Old stone walls were bright with bee-covered valerian while ox-eye daisies fringed the verges. A step further along is Howard's House, constructed in 1632 as a dower house and now a small country house hotel and restaurant.



Pistachio mousse and raspberry sorbet

Swallows swooped low over the sunny garden and the meadows beyond. Noële ushered us through a pretty drawing room to a stone-flagged terrace for drinks and, we decided, lunch. A croquet lawn, fringed by beds filled with box, lavender, iris, sisyrinchium and geranium, a gently splashing fountain, a glass of excellent sauvignon, crisp home-made cheesy biscuits, a bowl of olives – I expected to see an angel or two lurking in the shrubs.

Other guests arrived, deciding, like us, to eat outside. The menu changes daily for lunch and dinner and, after a wander around the gardens, admiring the views of meadows and woods, the church spire and the manor house chimneys, we settled on wood pigeon breast and brown trout (both local) for our starters, then pork, black pudding, mustard mash and Calvados sauce for my partner and guinea fowl, gratin dauphinoise, confit tomato and grilled aubergine for me. We could have had ham hock and foie gras terrine with onion marmalade or grilled goats' cheese with beetroot salad as starters, and stone red sea bream with crushed potatoes, courgette, samphire and sauce vièrge, or asparagus and blue cheese risotto with lemon oil, for the main course.

And here, I'm ashamed to say, I fell down on my duty. When the starters arrived we tucked in before I'd even thought about a photograph. But they looked and tasted good – the wood pigeon nicely pink and neatly carved on a pea purée (I wondered if there had been any relationship between the pigeon and the peas before its demise) with a hazelnut dressing, and my trout, the soft texture contrasting with shredded pickled cucumber and a sweet mustard dressing.

The same thing happened with the pork and the guinea fowl (a walk round the village after lunch had me averting my eyes as we met



Nick Wentworth and Noële Thompson

a band of noisy guinea fowl out for a stroll). I dipped into the black pudding and mustard mash, which was pretty good. The grilled aubergine was a stroke of genius tasting good with the architectural slice of gratin dauphinoise and the tender guinea fowl.

By the time my pudding (pistachio mousse and raspberry sorbet) and my partner's cheese (a comprehensive selection of British cheeses with homemade biscuits) arrived, I'd pulled myself together enough to take a photograph. Other puds were tiramisu with peanut shortbread and warm triple-chocolate brownie with vanilla ice-cream.

Nick and Noële sat down for a chat over coffee and homemade chocolates. She's been running the nine-bedroom hotel for seven years and a couple of years ago persuaded Nick (who had been part of the team at the then Michelin-starred Chesil Rectory and the award-winning Greyhound at Stockbridge) to join her.

Running a country hotel is all-encompassing – but Nick has made the change happily and the partnership seemed to us, after a very pleasant outing, to be one made in heaven. **✓**

Set-price lunch (£27 three courses or £22.50 for two). Dinner can be taken from the à la carte menu (£45 three courses, £35 for two) or from the table d'hôte menu