

# The View review

**Rosemary Staal**  
*discovers a welcome oasis  
in a tarmac desert*



Solstice Brasserie and Bar • Holiday Inn Salisbury-Stonehenge • Solstice Park • Amesbury SP4 7SQ  
0845 241 7990 • [www.solsticebrasserie.co.uk](http://www.solsticebrasserie.co.uk)

**T**here has to be a good reason to get me away from my fireside in winter. As reasons go, is a booking for dinner at the restaurant attached to a new Holiday Inn near Amesbury altogether compelling enough?

The decision is made for me when I note that our fridge boasts little more than one hard-boiled egg. The prospect of sharing that, combined with the call of duty, gets me and D out of the house and heading for what turns out to be one of the strangest locations we have ever ventured into.

Solstice Park, just down the road from Stonehenge, is one of those depressing blots that attach themselves to the edge of towns: a sprawl of anonymous buildings that appear to have been thrown up in an emergency. ‘These’ll do for the time being,’ someone has said.

Dominant in the area of park we’re headed for is the Holiday Inn, a lozenge-shaped

building that at least looks as though someone has taken the trouble to design it, with all its glass and shiny bits giving it some individuality. Around it lie rather too many reminders of the state we’re in: fast-food joints, a supermarket, a fast-food pub and the like.

However, I must not judge a book by its cover. The Solstice Brasserie might be a little unconventionally situated – it doesn’t get much more unlikely than the ground floor of a chain hotel, surrounded by tarmac and some severely clipped grass and with the lights of traffic on the A303 jazzing against the windows – but it’s what lies within that matters, and that’s what D and I are here to explore.

The Solstice Brasserie and Bar is a franchise that happens to be located here, in the hotel, just off to the right from reception. I don’t think I’ve been in a Holiday Inn since about 1978 so I wouldn’t know if this one is either typical or unique, but it’s certainly smart, much needed and already very popular judging by its impressive occupancy figures.

There’s a lovely curve of floor-to-ceiling windows around the outer edge of the restaurant, where we sit, and the kitchens are just close enough for us to enjoy hearing chef director Matt Bills calling out the orders and exhorting his troops.

Apparently he has a purpose-built range in there, an astonishingly sophisticated piece of equipment, complete with an integral refrigerated unit. It cooks well. Or, rather, Matt cooks well. He does all the cooking himself, working a 75-hour week, which is a stroll compared with the 100 hours a week he was putting in when the bar and

brasserie first opened four months earlier.

The menu is great – even fussy me could be well fed here for several days. I choose a butternut squash risotto for starters (it’s wonderful) and delicious, toothsome barramundi, born and bred in the New Forest, with fragrant rice and a tomato, onion and coriander salad for my main course. Trevor, the friendly assistant restaurant manager, recommends I have the fish. ‘It has a peaty flavour,’ he suggests. He’s right.

D declares his starter of coconut-crusted Thai fishcakes with beansprout and green onion salad to be ‘absolutely heavenly’, and he’s still floating around up there while tucking in to a 10oz teriyaki rump steak that is ‘beautifully cooked’.

It’s impossible to resist the dessert menu, so we don’t. I go for a dieter’s dream: bitter chocolate and orange tart topped with rocky road ice cream, just the 12 million calories and tasting sensational, and D goes into quiet ecstasies over his banana tarte tatin.

The things we appreciate here are the very nice atmosphere, the very good staff, and, above all, the thoughtfully prepared dishes using fresh, mainly local, seasonal ingredients, cooked with care and attractively presented. It is also incredibly good value and if the whole set-up were translated to a high street or into a roadside pub, rather than a Holiday Inn, I am sure it would be wildly popular. Certainly if this was a fair world, it would be driving its garish neighbouring eateries out of the park.

**Our three-course meal for two, excluding drinks: £43.95** **V**

