

The View review

Annie Bullen

relishes local produce at Lainston House



The Avenue Restaurant • Lainston House Hotel • Sparsholt • Winchester
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My friend Lindsey, normally gentle and polite and not given to bossing people around, spoke with a note of urgency.

'Eat that pastry!' she commanded, gesturing at the remains of the so-beautiful little tart, a stack of soft pink rhubarb atop a creamy custard lining a crisp pastry base on the narrow rectangular plate in front of her. A tiny glass pot full of elderflower jelly and a little mound of ice-cream were lined up next to the tart, mint foam swirled delicately around.

Although I was absorbed in my own chocolate heaven I jabbed my spoon at the melting mouthful. Lindsey became preoccupied with my chocolate sorbet (with caramelised cocoa nibs), so I hastily savoured the spiced hot chocolate shot before trying her elderflower jelly which was very good with the white chocolate and roasted sesame parfait. I'm afraid we made a bit of a mess of the thick white tablecloth but we licked our plates clean.

We'd displayed more restraint earlier during the first courses of our dinner at the Avenue Restaurant at Lainston House Hotel. Head chef Andrew MacKenzie uses the simplest and the best of local meat, fish and vegetables – but there's nothing simple



about the way he and his team cook and combine the ingredients.

My fat and juicy scallops each had a small slice of slow-cooked pork belly hidden inside. The delicious pink foam was made with a beetroot puree, there was a cep or two and a smoky flavour given by judiciously sprinkled chorizo oil. I tried to eat it slowly and mopped up the juices with olive bread. Lindsey's pasta, a handsome square of ravioli, filled with goats cheese, partnered with tomato chutney and emblazoned with a comet's tail of beetroot foam, disappeared quite quickly too.

Fresh peas, generous shavings of truffle, organic wild mushrooms from a Stockbridge company and rice-shaped orzo pasta were the main constituents of Lindsey's main course. I can't tell you the name of the Gloucester Old Spot pig which provided my plate of delicious meat (belly, sausage and fillet) but restaurant manager Kevin Crisp assured me that he (or she) had a lovely life in the hotel's grounds. Lindsey and I like to talk rather a lot on these occasions but this time we were strangely silent, concentrating on flavours and textures.

Luckily a decent interval is left between courses, so we did some catching up while gazing round the wood-panelled dining room with atmospheric portraits and tables at comfortable intervals. A large party in the bar earlier were eating in one of the private dining rooms of this large William and Anne country house hotel, so the atmosphere in the restaurant was peaceful and pleasant.

We retired to the Cedar Bar for a last chat, a pot of mint tea (made with fresh mint from

the garden) and more of Mark's chocolates. Bar manager Francesco Oglialoro came over to chat about the differences between old and new world wines (I'd had a glass of Primitivo with my pork while Lindsey chose a New Zealand Sauvignon).

And, yes, Francesco – those Bellinis you made before dinner with fresh peach juice and prosecco, probably were the best in the world.

Our meal, without drinks, came to around £105 **V**

Local suppliers whose produce is used by Andrew MacKenzie and his team include Sunnyfields Organic (vegetables), Laverstoke Park Farm meat, Lyburn Cheeses, Hill Farm apples and apple juice. More meat comes from Uptons of Basset, sea food from Portland Shellfish, mushrooms from Stockbridge's Fundamentally Fungus. Most of the herbs and many of the vegetables come from the hotel's own garden (as does some of the pork which is reared in the grounds) while bread is made in the kitchens. The chocolate is the work of Mark Tilling who is ranked among the world's top ten chocolate chefs.

The tasty little 'amuse bouche' that evening was galantine of pork. Lindsey, who does not eat meat, declined. Five minutes later a plate with tender asparagus with a tomato salsa discreetly appeared.