

The View review

Cassi Kingshott steps behind a 16th-century façade and finds all the comforts she could hope for



**The Bear & Ragged Staff • Stonymarsh • Michelmersh • Romsey • Hants • SO51 0LB
01794 368602 • www.thebearandraggedstaff.net**

The Bear & Ragged Staff looks deceptively small from the outside. When we stepped inside on a foggy winter's evening, the roaring fire that greeted us was not the only pleasant surprise.

Recently redecorated, the pub, which dates back to the 16th century, is large and extremely comfortable – how pubs have changed since those long-ago times. Today's pubs, like The Bear & Ragged Staff, are more like a good hotel or even your own sitting room, with comfortable sofas, pretty lampshades and soft furnishings.

Jonathan Salmon is a welcoming host and as my guest and I settled into our cosy corner of the bar area he quickly brought us our drinks, a glass of chilled chardonnay for me and a large branded beer for my companion, who later rather regretted not trying one of the real ales on offer. Jonathan told us that the gardens at the rear have been landscaped this year and that the garden is also immensely popular in the summer, which is easy to imagine. There is a sister pub, The Fish Inn, at Ringwood.

We arrived relatively early on this particular Saturday evening but the pub was already more than half full with parents, grandparents and



Jonathan Salmon, a welcoming host

children, as well as couples. The Bear & Ragged Staff seemed to be a family-type of establishment, rather than somewhere for young people on a Saturday night. This is surely due to the menu, which is varied and reasonably priced. I started with baked wedges of brie with a redcurrant sauce and my guest chose battered calamari rings with a creamy dip and salad garnish. The portions were very generous and would easily make a satisfying light lunch.

By the time our main courses arrived the pub was absolutely full, with no space at all, so the best tip here is to book or arrive in good time to ensure a table. This pub has a lively feel without being too noisy, and is warm and cosy.

For my main course I decided on the fresh Kimbridge river trout with almonds; the fish was moist and accompanied by new potatoes and a fresh side salad, which included mustard

and cress. This is quite an old-fashioned salad addition but I'm very fond of these spicy little sprouts. A pie of prime beefsteak cooked slowly in a rich Guinness sauce went down well with my companion. The sauce was apparently quite sweet as was the mash with mustard that he had chosen from the variety of potato dishes available.

The pudding menu featured all the tempting pub favourites such as apple and rhubarb crumble, sticky toffee pudding and Bailey's cheesecake. Having chosen the toffee pudding, my guest demolished it pretty quickly. My choice of waffle with pecan nuts was a little surprising as there was undoubtedly a complete pack of whole pecans scattered over the ice-cream topping. Here, too, the portions were generous, so there was no danger of leaving still feeling peckish.

There were also some local cheeses on the menu but, as much as I enjoy cheese, I can never find the space for it at the end of a meal. Here there was Old Winchester Mature and Loosehanger Oak Smoked. Perhaps next time. **V**

Our meal, without drinks, came to £38.15



Baked wedges of brie with a redcurrant sauce



A pie of prime beefsteak cooked in Guinness sauce