

# The View review

Rosemary Staal  
*finds an American chef working wonders*



The Mill Arms • Barley Hill • Dunbridge • Romsey • SO51 0LF • 01794 340401 • [www.millarms.co.uk](http://www.millarms.co.uk)

Eager anticipation is one thing, but a strong desire to eat the table is quite another. I am so looking forward to our visit to the Mill Arms but so hungry by the time we arrive that I fear my self-control may desert me. In fact, against all the odds, it holds up quite well, only escaping its leash at pudding-choosing time – of which more later.

In any case, I quickly see that the table where D and I are to sit, at the garden end of a pretty conservatory, would present too much of a challenge to my jaws: it is a lovely, solid, scrubbed pine one, square in shape and with comfortably upholstered chairs set around it.

We are welcomed by Andrea Bentall, landlady for the past year of this attractive, rambling pub with restaurants and rooms. She runs it all with her husband, Ian, a Hampshire man, but she herself is a New Zealander, evident from the engaging accent despite more than 20 years of living in the UK. D and I are impressed by her cheerful manner and by the fact that she has trained up a team of happy, smiling serving staff who would be the envy of many establishments the country over.

What is more, when they bring food to the table they know who is having what, so there's none of that awkward interrogation along the lines of 'Are you the battered cod, madam?'

Indeed there is battered cod on the bar menu, along with sausages, chips and other dishes that cause D to look wistful and recall his reckless days before anno domini and the health police came to call.

We make our choice from the à la carte menu, chalked on large boards at one end of the busy bar (this is very much a locals' pub as well as an incredibly popular lunch and dinner destination for people from a wide radius).

I go for warm goats cheese on a black olive crouton with chargrilled peppers, followed by black sea bream fillet with a chick pea salad. I might have ordered the Cornish crab starter ('Are you the Cornish crab, madam?') but D gets there first. I make him surrender a forkful of it to me. It is cool and very tasty, the crab salad layered with pasta so that it looks like a very jolly mille feuille.

My goats cheese starter is the sort of food that has my name stamped on it. I'd eat it all day, every day if I could. D's main course of crispy lamb shoulder really does have my name on it, for it is accompanied not just by garlic crushed potatoes and Mediterranean vegetables, but by rosemary sauce. He absolutely loves it, doing the old rolling-eyes bit and muttering half-finished remarks like 'Can't remember when I last ate lamb as good . . . ?'

I ignore his 'Never get fed like this at home' comment and concentrate on my bream, which sits on a tasty bed of chick peas and shredded cabbage and comes with a parcel of curried prawns. There's a lovely blend of flavours and textures and I am intrigued to note how well the curried prawns complement and draw out the flavour of the fish.

It is no surprise to learn that Joe Cathers, the chef, earned two AA rosettes for his last establishment, The Running Horse at Littleton, near Winchester. After eating food like this, I am sure it can only be a matter of time before similar accolades come the way of the Mill Arms, where Joe arrived in January. He's an American, from Maryland, and among his UK experience has been a year working with Heston Blumenthal at The Fat Duck, Bray.

And so to the puddings. My habit is to decline and then feel virtuous while I watch D go all gooey over something life-shortening and delicious. This time, though, my self-control deserts me over the desserts and I find myself melting under the influence of a quite sublime pecan and bourbon pie with blackcurrant sorbet. Food of the gods? Naturally.

D goes for broke with a panna cotta with butterscotch. He is so bowled over by it that I suspect he would like to bring Joe home with us. Come to think of it, so would I.

**Our three-course meal for two, excluding wine: £48.50** **V**

