

The View review

Rosemary Staal *meets a culinary genius relishing his work in the New Forest*

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When you have one of the world's most eminent chefs imposing his standards on your kitchen, there is every likelihood that you're going to have satisfied customers on the other side of the swing door.

We have come to see if this is the case at the Montagu Arms, where Shaun Hill is Director of Cooking. Shaun earned a Michelin star at his landmark Merchant House restaurant in Ludlow, but closed the business last year to seek a new challenge.

The Montagu Arms snapped him up and for the past year he has brought his



exemplary talents to the 18th century country house on the Beaulieu River, where he trains the kitchen brigade, under head chef Scott McKenzie Foy, creates dazzling menus and sources local ingredients of the highest quality.

Talking with him before our meal, D and I are struck by his obvious enthusiasm for his role. Here is a grandfather who has made his name as a chef of the highest calibre (consistently one of the world's top 20) yet who is still eager for more involvement with what makes him tick: tip-top local produce purely and simply cooked by people who care passionately about what they are doing.

Will we enjoy it? The signs are good when a glance at the menu reveals five starters, five main courses and five desserts that could be evidence that I've died and gone to heaven.

D resists the temptation to smack his lips while ordering sautéed scallops with leek puree and pancetta and a main course of fillet of New Forest beef poached in consommé. His anticipation is palpable.

After a long consultation with my tastebuds, I choose baby courgette, basil and parley risotto, followed by fillet of brill. We just have time to appreciate our very lovely surroundings – an elegant dining-room looking out on to the terrace, dominated by a *Magnolia grandiflora* in second bloom – before our first course arrives.

This is food that's been prepared with skilled hands and loving hearts. I suspect the whole kitchen is enjoying having Shaun at

the helm because it shows: absolutely everything looks and tastes exquisite. 'It's all about doing small things carefully,' Shaun says. I like that.

We enjoy an intermediate course of Rosary goats cheese and piperade salad (the cheese comes from Landford, on the northern edge of the Forest), then my fish arrives and Paul Gomes, the deputy restaurant manager, takes pride in explaining how it was prepared. He knows, he says, because he's tried everything 'so that I know in detail what's on the menu'.

The brill has been grilled to moist perfection under a deep green cloak of beurre Montpellier, a combination of blended spinach, basil, chives and butter, Paul says. Yes, I'm right after all, I am in heaven. D joins me there, transported by his poached local beef. 'Sensational,' he declares.

It's obligatory to eat puds in heaven, so we do: raspberry soufflé and Toblerone ice-cream, for him and strawberry charlotte with summer berries for me. They are as wonderful as they sound – not too sweet and with the fruit flavours dominating.

We take coffee and petits fours in the Library bar. I am reluctant to go home. I like it here so much I consider moving in, if only Shaun would let me become Director of Tasting. Stranger things have happened in heavenly dreams.

• **Our four-course dinner, without wine: £90** 