

venue ²⁴ food+drink

Hotel's **taste** of luxury

THE DINING experience at **Sopwell House Hotel** in St Albans has such an olde worldie country house opulence about it that it makes you want to arrive in a horse and carriage – preferably flanked by liveried footmen. But I suppose a Ford Focus will have to do.

However, as soon as you are safely inside the portals it feels like we're back in a Jane Austen novel being seated on a sofa in an anteroom, served delicious drinks like gin and tonics and Bellinis (made with crushed raspberries instead of peaches).

Then, while we peruse the menu in a leisured manner, we are served an exotic selection of canapés, wolfed down by my companion despite admonitions from me to save himself for even finer fare.

Then onto the dining room with its crisp white damask table linens and honey-coloured chandeliers shedding a gentle glow over the sparkling glasses and silverware. We have entered heaven... accompanied not by an angel on a lyre but a pianist playing softly in the background.

My duck foie gras was predictably rich but there was not too much of it. It was served with the most delicious warmed hazelnut sauce in a shot glass.

By comparison my friend's scallops with a lime mousse, chilli and fennel salad seemed positively pedestrian but he had no complaints.

My large glass of Chablis labelled a Gloire de Chablis was OK but his cheaper Australian Kell's Edge Blend Z Chardonnay was more interesting and flavoursome.



While on the topic of wine I have to say the Chilean merlot I had with my main course – a Casa La Joya Grand Reserve – was the most delicious red I have had in years. It was like drinking liquid velvet. And, unbelievably, they do it by the glass.

Mark had a small glass (he was driving, tee hee) of a South African pinotage – quite spicy but unremarkable.

Well, before I get too carried away with the boozy section of the evening I may say my main course of Swaddle Farm lamb with potato puree, confit carrot and port sauce accompanied my wine very well.

Mark's saddle of rabbit stuffed with black pudding and apples accompanied by thyme fondant and celeriac puree was all very well in its way but surpassed by the lamb.

Vegetables can make or break a meal for me and our side dishes of carrots, broccoli, carrot and mange tout were not only perfectly al dente but tasted very fresh and flavoursome without being swamped in butter or oil as is so often the case.

Nearly forgot to mention a delightful raspberry sorbet which cleansed the palate between the starter and the main course.

With the dessert we tried a Marmesa Vineyards Red Harvest which is made from a pinot noir grape in California.

It did match my bitter chocolate tart served with malted milk ice cream and hazelnut tuile very well but was perhaps overly sweet for Mark's peanut pannacotta with iced banana parfait and caramelised banana. But he was driving so he couldn't indulge himself anyway. Shame really.

By this point in the evening we were both sated (well I was, to be more accurate) and had to turn away proffered choices of liqueurs and coffees.

Sopwell House duty manager Arno Meintjes and his very obliging assistant Chantelle – both South African – could not do enough to make our visit exceptional and it was a thoroughly delightful evening in every possible way.

Anyone looking for a really special night out – perhaps to celebrate a special anniversary – can be assured of the real deal here.

One of its advantages I found was that the chef has kept the menu choices down to a manageable level – presumably so that they can do a small number of dishes exceptionally well instead of offering so many dishes that the quality suffers.

Sopwell House in Cottonmill Lane – a Georgian country house set in 12 acres of tranquil countryside – also has a Brasserie section with excellent food and special offer deals but for the luxury option I would recommend The Restaurant.

Telephone 01727 864477 to book or go online at www.sopwellhouse.co.uk.

MARY BROSANAN



The Restaurant at Sopwell House offers fine dining and top class cuisine created by award-winning chef James Chapman. Enjoy modern British food prepared using the finest local and seasonal ingredients and served in a stylish and contemporary ambience.

£15.50 per person for 2 courses

£19.50 per person for 3 courses

To dine at these prices, sign up at www.sopwellhouseoffers.co.uk for your own personalised voucher.

Pre-booking is required. Book online at www.sopwellhouse.co.uk/onlinetablebooking or call 01727 864477 quoting RES29.

You will need to present the offer voucher upon arrival.

The **RESTAURANT**
at **SOPWELL HOUSE**
St. Albans

Cottonmill Lane, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL1 2HQ
www.sopwellhouse.co.uk

Offer is valid for lunch and dinner from Wednesdays to Fridays from 1st September to 20th November, 2009. Offer not valid for lunch during the Ladies Lunch dates of 3rd, 16th and 23rd September, 7th and 21st October and 4th November 2009 and during other events in The Restaurant.