

RYE'S FOODIE BOLT-HOLE

The décor may be rustic, but the cuisine at The George in Rye is contemporary in every way. Giselle Whiteaker samples some of East Sussex's finest produce.

From the cobblestoned High Street of the medieval town of Rye in East Sussex, a maze of passageways and lanes lead to intriguing discoveries such as the almost millennium-old St Mary's parish church, the Ypres Tower and Henry James' Lamb House. The town itself is a lovely place to be, but the biggest attraction for foodies has to be The George in Rye.

The George in Rye dates back to 1575 when it was a coaching inn. Its white frontage, dating from the early 18th Century, acts as a frontispiece for a timber structure at least 200 years older. Perched in a central location on the High Street, The George's 34 rooms and suites have been restored by the current owners, with co-owner Katie Clarke and her design partner Maria Speake of Retrouvius pulling together a rustic chic look that's immediately apparent from the comfortable lounge space near the entrance. Anyone seeking to emulate the look can pop into The Shop Next Door, a dedicated retail space a few doors down selling the property's homewares, from Frette bed linen to Lineas candles and Farrow and Ball paints.

My friend Mohamed and I flop into a cushy sofa in the lounge for a coffee before we check in to the gorgeous attic-style room once the temporary abode of Kevin Costner. We are reliably informed that

George Clooney stayed in the room next door. We're in good company then. Passing through the cosy bar and the courtyard set up for al fresco dining, we see a few punters soaking up the fading afternoon sunlight that is flooding the area, but we shoot out to explore the town.

By the time dinner rolls around our stomachs are rumbling, but we're confident that The George Grill's eclectic menu, featuring classics like fish and chips – albeit Harvey's Ale battered cod and hand-cut chips – alongside more avant garde dishes like Jospier-roasted native lobster, will fill our need. Local seafood features heavily and after some debate, Mohamed and I agree to focus on the bounty of the ocean for our starters.

The Rye Bay scallops are lightly seared, leaving them tender and moist. I can see the lady on the next table eyeing them covetously as I slice into the first morsel and pop it into my mouth to melt. "I'm having those tomorrow night," she announces loudly to her husband. The dollop of prune jus on top and the smear of cauliflower purée underneath sandwich the roe-on scallops in a fragrant sweetness, offset by the accompanying Boudin Noir, which I discover is the more romantic name for black pudding.



The Josper roasted Giant Gambas in lemon, chilli, garlic, fennel seed and olive oil are equally mouthwatering, the tender flesh of the oversized crustaceans highlighted by the exquisite combination of flavours in the sauce. We mop up the remnants with wedges of crusty bread, unable to let a single drop go to waste.

In the pause before our mains, we admire The Grill's décor. The dining room has been designed and furnished entirely from reclaimed finds including a whole gym floor from a girl's school in Wales and a huge fish wall-piece which was originally commissioned for the reception of the Barclays London office in the 1950s. Past the plant pot on the table packed with cheerfully blooming spring bulbs we can see into the open kitchen, where the chefs industriously whirl around, tweaking each dish with calm precision.

I've been straightforward and ordered a rib-eye steak cooked medium-rare on the Josper charcoal grill, which comes served with a slice of tomato resting on a grilled mushroom, with onion rings and hand-cut chips. Often, the true test of a restaurant is how well they prepare the simplest of dishes, and The George Grill's efforts prove to be exceptional. The meat is so tender it parts under the lightest pressure from my knife and it dissolves on my tongue in waves of flavour.

Mohamed is not the most proficient cook. "If there's no fire, I give myself a high five," he tells me as he tucks into the tantalising tang of his Bream fillet cooked in crazy water, with fennel, tomato, saffron potatoes, chilli and rosemary. The zing of tomato in the wine sauce complements the flavour of the succulent Bream, and Mohamed falls silent until the end of the dish, caught up in savouring every mouthful.

"Can I interest you in the dessert menu?" asks the waiter, laying out a list of temptations. We hesitate as we scroll through the treats, settling on a shared sundae. Moments later, I see an old-school sundae glass piled high with whipped cream hit the counter of the pass, from where it is swiftly delivered. We dig deep, down to the vanilla, chocolate and blackcurrant ice-cream, finding brownie chunks, chocolate straws, meringue discs and glacé cherries buried in the cream's fluffy depths. It's truly decadent and it's with sighs of satisfaction that our spoons tinkle on the bottom of the empty glass.

The meal complete, we stumble back to the comfort of our room, where I fill the deep metal tub for a relaxing soak. In a state of complete satiation, I crawl into my plush bed to dream of movie stars and sundaes and the full English breakfast to come.



Perfection on a plate



Scallops



Giant Gambas

For more information on The George in Rye, see www.thegeorgeinrye.com.

Ingredients

1 large handful cooked spaghetti (200g)
 150g halved cherry tomatoes
 200g-220g live clams
 4 cubes butter
 125ml Fino Sherry
 100ml cream
 Good pinch of lovage
 1 x chilli deseeded (to taste)
 1 x garlic clove (to taste)
 Good pinch of fennel seeds (to taste)
 Olive oil

DORSET CLAM SPAGHETTI

- 1) Make the chilli and garlic paste, adding the chilli, garlic and fennel seeds to a drizzle of olive oil and pulse into a paste.
- 2) Heat a medium pan with a fitted lid on high heat. Add in all of the ingredients; butter first, the spaghetti, tomatoes, clams, sherry, cream, garlic and chilli paste, and lovage.
- 3) Put the lid on and shake.
- 4) Cook on a medium heat for about 4 minutes. Remove the lid and bring to the boil then reduce for 1 minute.

Stir to ensure all the ingredients have mixed together thoroughly. Serve in a pasta bowl.

