



The terrace at Castle House Hotel

CUISINE

A ROYAL FEAST

Castle House Hotel in Hereford is a rare find. It brings a whole new meaning to the concept of farm gate to table. Giselle Whiteaker samples the fare.



Fillet of Ballingham Beef on garden spinach and potato cake, topped with pureed swede



Caramelised Sea Trout with chorizo, baby broad beans and little gem

“Using our own produce was a natural progression,” says George Watkins, the business manager of Castle House Hotel in Hereford. The hotel, Hereford’s luxury hotspot, is very much a family affair, owned and managed by the enterprising Watkins family. “We’re farmers by nature,” George continues, “...so it made sense.”

Once two townhouses, Castle House is an elegant Regency villa perched in a commanding position at the top of Castle Street in the lovely cathedral city of Hereford. In addition to the stylish rooms and suites within the main structure, No.25,

a fine townhouse less than a minute’s walk from the main house, contains eight further tasteful accommodation options. We’re staying in the The Huntington Suite at No.25, overlooking a beautiful, well-tended garden. The main hotel sits beside what remains of the old castle moat and ducks lazily paddle on the waterway as we sit in the sun, sipping cappuccinos at a garden table.

“We were lucky to inherit a very good gardener who came with the hotel,” says George, glancing around fondly. “He works here and on the Ballingham farm, and works with Claire on what’s needed in the kitchen.”

Executive head chef Claire Nicholl hails from these parts and is tasked with crafting and delivering seasonally-changing menus for both the formal Restaurant and the Ballingham Bistro. Claire is close to being a fixture – she’s been at the hotel for more than a decade, sharing her passion for sourcing ingredients as close to the hotel as possible and mentoring local college students to foster food innovation.

Despite her long reign, or perhaps due to it, Claire’s foodie flair is evident. It’s clear that relying on seasonal produce requires a large measure of creativity and know-how. Seated

in the sage green restaurant decorated with botanical prints, my mother Judy and I are keenly anticipating the repast to come. We've had our appetites whetted by tantalising canapés in the attached bar lounge, the shot of gazpacho with basil and the exquisite aubergine mousse with quails' egg setting the bar high.

Our starters don't just meet the bar; they hurdle it. The colourful combination of sweet, pan-fried scallops, strawberries, cucumber and creamy avocado, paired with a mild chilli dressing, is reminiscent of a work of art, but one that leaves the taste of summer lingering on the tongue. The delicate slices of Lapsang-cured duck breast continue the summer theme, matched with artfully scattered raspberry halves, raspberry ketchup and crisp green beans and topped with a curl of potato wafer. The gamey flavour of the duck is tamed by the tangy ketchup, the Lapsang tea contributing a light, smoky flavour to the tender meat, which melts in the mouth.

Judy's main, of loch-reared, pan fried trout with pomme puree, samphire, grapes and cucumber, is topped with a smattering

of tiny, brown shrimps. She savours every bite wordlessly, cleaning her plate. My pork tenderloin is wrapped around sun-dried tomatoes and mozzarella, surrounded by curls of courgette, hand-shaped basil gnocchi, and a generous dollop of aubergine puree smeared along one side. The flavours are intense and satisfying, yet light enough that I don't feel too guilty about perusing the dessert menu.

Put simply, the desserts are beautiful – both in presentation and taste. The elderflower and raspberry parfait is matched with elderflower gel, raspberry ice, fresh raspberries and crisp pastry triangles, a perfect contrast of sweet and tart. The biggest surprise though, is the modern take on an Arctic roll. The dark plate highlights the generous curves of the white gooseberry and ginger Arctic roll, which is plated with a scoop of pink gooseberry ice, edible flowers, green grape halves and honeycomb chunks. It is light and airy; the perfect warm-weather dessert.

Throughout the meal, the multitudinous flavours share something – a freshness and vibrancy that's of the region. It feels like we are consuming the season and the land.

It's like stepping back in time and eating vegetables pulled from the soil or plucked from their stems only moments ago from grandma's veggie patch. This is how food is supposed to be.

Post-dinner, over petit fours of chocolate truffle with tayberries, Claire joins us in the lounge. Her enthusiasm for her work shines from her face. When she hears we are unfamiliar with tayberries, she scoots into the kitchen to bring us samples of the fruit, which is a cross between a blackberry and a raspberry. She also presents us with white currants, the almost translucent fruit concealing a burst of sweetness. No doubt these will make their way onto the menu in the coming days.

"You've been here a long time. What makes you stay? I ask. "We have a great team. I like it," Claire states matter-of-factly. That's reason enough. The morale of the 2008 American-Japanese movie *The Ramen Girl* is that to become extraordinary, cuisine must be imbued with the passion of its maker. That's what Castle House dishes up: food with heart.

For more information about Castle House Hotel and its dining options, see castlehse.co.uk



Chef Claire Nicholls and George Watkins in the kitchen garden at Ballingham Hall



The Castle House restaurant

BEETROOT CURED COD, PICKLED GRAPES, BEETROOT CARPACCIO, WATERCRESS

Serves 4

For the Cod

2x100g Cod loins
50g Rock Salt
50g Castor Sugar
Zest of 1 Lemon
1 Cooked Beetroot Pureed

For the Beetroot

2 Beetroots
25g Salt
25g Castor Sugar
Juice of 1 Lemon

For the Grapes

20 Grapes cut in half
1/2 Lemon
50ml Elderflower Cordial
20g Sugar

Watercress to Garnish



Cut the loins of cod in half length ways, mix together the salt, sugar and lemon zest. Roll the cod in the cure mix and make sure it is well coated. Cover and leave in the fridge for about three hours to cure.

Peel and slice the beetroot as thinly as possible on a mandolin if you have one. Heat the sugar, salt and lemon juice in a pan. Place the beetroot onto a tray covered with cling-film – do not overlap - and brush with the syrup. Layer with another sheet of cling-film and continue until you have used all the beetroot. Leave in the fridge to marinate for approximately three hours.

Slice the grapes in half top to tail and place into a container. Place the cordial into a pan and add the sugar, heating it gently until the sugar has dissolved. Peel the zest off the lemon and add it to the pan, then add the lemon juice. When cool, pour over the grapes.

When the cod has cured, wash of the cure and dry with a little kitchen paper. Coat it with the beetroot puree and leave for 30 minutes. To serve, wipe the beetroot puree off the cod and slice into 1cm slices. Arrange onto a plate, peel the beetroot off the cling-film and place randomly on the plate. Scatter with grapes and watercress leaves and finally drizzle a little of the grape syrup over the dish.

