



CREATIVE COUNTRY CUISINE

The latest outpost of the de Savary family's boutique inns at the heart of the Old Minster village in The Cotswolds doesn't feel like a regular hotel. It doesn't taste like one either.

"This is the herb garden," says Tristan Sumner ruefully as he points to a pile of snow with a few small sprigs poking out, reaching for the sun. "It is usually full of herbs, but..." he trails off. Tristan is rightfully proud of the gardens he has created around The Old Swan & Minster Mill despite their disappearance under the snow. Not only do the extensive landscaped areas include recreation opportunities for the hotel's guests,

but also, Tristan has nurtured a herb and vegetable garden into existence to provide organic ingredients from mint to strawberries for the on site gastro-pub.

It is Head Chef David Mwitii who takes these superb fresh home-produced ingredients and combines them with local produce to craft them into hearty pub fare served with gusto and panache. Brought up in Kenya, David worked in a number of

resorts but was fascinated by the seasons in the UK and how that affected produce. "It was the variety that intrigued me – different vegetables and different fruits", David explains. He worked in several restaurants and gastro-pubs before settling here over two years ago. "Since then we changed everything," explains David shyly. "I have to get creative or people will fall asleep in the kitchen." David quietly stamped his creative cooking style onto the menus, earning the respect of both his team and local diners.

David and Tristan work closely together to determine what will be planted each season so that it can be used in the kitchens. "If it's rosemary I need, or bay

leaves, they have to be out there. If it's thyme, it has to be all the varieties of thyme," shares David. "I am very disappointed the snow has covered the last bits of my herbs. Luckily I have a good local supplier who helps me when I can't get the quantities I need from my garden." David continues: "For my ice-creams and sorbets, it is important that the right herbs and flowers are ready at the right time of the month, like geraniums and lavender." Curious about these flavours, I vow to try the David's ice-cream at dinner.

"Tristan is really really good with the gardens. When it comes to kids play time, the strawberries have got to be there," David says. "They cut their own strawberries. It is really fun." This discloses part of the Old Swan's charm. As an independently owned property, there is a camaraderie evident not only amongst the staff, but also in the interactions with guests, whether at the hotel or the pub. Everyone is warm and welcoming, attentive, without straying into formal over-the-top silver service.

The Old Swan's atmosphere reflects this orientation. It is cosy, a fire crackling in the corner. Rather than one dining area, the rooms are a myriad of smaller heavily-beamed nooks; rugged flag-stone floors contrasting with quirky decorations. Board games are piled on a shelf for public use. This is a place to linger in comfort, sipping an after-dinner aperitif as you contemplate the scrabble board.

David's culinary inspiration comes partly from the available produce and partly from home. "I relate it to back home," David explains. "It's all about traditional style cooking, which relates to what I am doing here. It's about the countryside." Growing up in rural Kenya on a coffee farm, David draws parallels between the game meats and fresh produced available. "Our food is very local", he claims. "I use the eggs from the chickens out there, very nice eggs, organic and all that, with a phenomenal yolk." David's instincts on eggs are so finely tuned that he can tell a free range organic



egg just by looking at it. The local butcher also knows his preferences well. "Sometimes he brings me things without asking me. He is very good", comments David. "Luckily we have Wynchwood Forest close by for tufted duck. Today he's brought in wild boar." My dinner choices for the evening are shaping up nicely.

Part of the culinary tradition at The Old Swan focuses on game meat. "This area is traditionally known as a stopover for people going shooting, so the regulars come here for game. They want to find pheasant and venison and all that kind of stuff," David explains. The game meats are popular not only with the locals though. City slickers are also fans. I understand why after I sample the duck terrine and the wild boar haunch steak with caramelised apple and cider jus, sourcing all of my

fare from Wynchwood Forest. The boar narrowly beat the pan roasted guinea fowl to my plate.

The menus at The Old Swan are a treat. While the staples stay put, David's specials are based on what his butcher and fishmonger have in good supply. From roasted Oxfordshire rack of lamb to fresh Devon crab and River Windrush crayfish cocktail, every dish has zing. "I always carry on with the pub style classics too," says David. "If someone's going to come here winter or summer, and you don't have fish and chips you'll get killed", he laughs. Sausage and mash and seasonal pies such as Guinness and venison also make regular appearances.



PREP TIME: 15 minutes COOKING TIME: 10 minutes
SERVES: 6 – 10 depending on mould size



INGREDIENTS

300g (12oz) Softened unsalted butter
300g (12oz) Dark chocolate
300g (12oz) Self raising flour
360g (14½oz) Castor sugar
25g (1oz) Cocoa powder
6 whole eggs
6 egg yolks
3tsp instant coffee granules (optional)
25g softened butter (extra for greasing)
50g cocoa powder (extra for dusting)

Sauce

125g (5oz) Dark chocolate
60g (2½oz) Salted butter
250ml Double cream

OLD SWAN CHOCOLATE FONDANT & CHOCOLATE SAUCE

“I just want to give you a good, solid plate of rustic, hearty country food. That’s my speciality,” David states definitively. The impact of David’s creative country cuisine on The Old Swan & Minster Mill is undeniable. Add to this the laid-back atmosphere of the gastro-pub and you’ll soon know there’s no place like it. Stay overnight and the in-room treats are also bound to delight. It’s hard to resist fresh berries, sloe gin and marshmallows toasted over the fire pit, even if you have already consumed a satiating meal.

For more information about the Old Swan & Minster Mill, one of the finest places to stay and eat in the Cotswolds, see: www.oldswanandminstermill.com

Preheat the oven to 200oc, gas mark 6. Melt the butter and use it to brush the sides and bases of the moulds, then dust a thin layer of cocoa powder, tipping out the excess. Chill the mould. Melt the dark chocolate and softened butter over a Bain Marie stirring occasionally. When melted, remove from the heat and allow to cool slightly. Beat the castor sugar with the eggs and yolks until pale in colour and fluffy. Whisk the egg mixture into the cooled chocolate mixture. Sift the flour and coffee into the chocolate mixture in thirds until all combined. Spoon the mix into the moulds and bake for 10 minutes or until risen and firm. Once cooked, carefully tip out of the mould and serve immediately.

FOR THE SAUCE

Melt the chocolate and butter over a Bain Marie, stirring until combined. Slowly add the double cream stirring all the time. When the cream is added, heat to the desired temperature and serve.

CHEFS TIPS

- When the fondant is cooked, allow it to rest for 30 seconds before carefully tipping out of the mould. This will help the fondant release without collapsing
- Serve chocolate fondant with Blood Orange sorbet, ginger ice cream or the chocolate sauce