

TROUT AND THE THAMES



NESTLED DEEP WITHIN THE OXFORDSHIRE COTSWOLDS, THE TROUT AT TADPOLE BRIDGE IS A HAVEN FOR FISHERMEN, FOODIES AND DOWNTON ABBEY FANS. GISELLE WHITEAKER FOLLOWS THE THAMES TO THIS PEACEFUL SPOT.

An epicurean is a person devoted to sensual enjoyment, especially that derived from fine food and drink. That sums me up in a nutshell, so after pouring over the Epicurean Club's website, packed with gorgeous boutique inns, I've booked myself into The Trout at Tadpole Bridge. It had me at the name.

It's a glorious spring day when my friend Caroline and I set off from London, heading for the Oxfordshire countryside. Several navigational mishaps lead us astray, but all feels right with the world when we arrive at The Trout – the Cotswold-stone-built inn gleams in the golden afternoon sun, with a few fluffy white clouds drifting overhead in an azure blue sky. Abutting the edge of the property is the River Thames, crossed by the single-arch, Grade II-Listed Tadpole Bridge.



Above and right: The Trout at Tadpole Bridge. A favourite of fishermen – and others.

The lengthy history of the 17th-century, two-storey pub is evident in its stone construction, timber-beamed ceilings and flagstone floors, although with an updated colour scheme and characterful touches, including a bulging, fish-lens mirror above the fireplace, quirky animal artwork on the walls, and a sizeable trout with bright red lips on a beam near the bar. Each of the six rooms – one downstairs, two upstairs, and three off the courtyard, one of which is dog-friendly – is named after a fishing fly, fitting given the inn’s proximity to premium chalkstream fishing beats.

Our suite, Prince Nymph, on the upper floor of the main building, is unusually laid out, with a generously proportioned bedroom leading through the open bathroom with its large, claw-foot bathtub, to a cosy lounge at the rear. A door in the bedroom leads to a small roof terrace with views of the bridge, sparrows happily chirruping as they prepare for night to fall. Had we had more time, we could have gone crayfishing in the Thames, then learned how to prepare and cook our catch, in a special Epicurean Experience with The Trout’s chef. Instead, we’ll make do with a meal in the AA-Rosette restaurant downstairs.

Seated at a table in the quieter rear section of the restaurant we peruse the menu, which is brimming with fresh fish dishes as well as hearty classics and seasonal produce. We start with the spiced soft-shell crab, the sweet, tender meat given a hint of piquancy by dollops of avocado and wasabi puree, and tangy pickled slices of carrot and cucumber. It’s a light, refreshing dish, that perfectly contrasts with our second starter, a hearty black pudding hash, with peas and chorizo, topped with a poached duck egg. “You know when you eat something and you don’t want to eat anything else because the flavour is so amazing...” Caroline says, trailing off as the next dish lands on the table.

She’s quick to recover from her bout of reticence, neatly halving the Gloucestershire Old Spot pork belly, with its deliciously caramelised crackling, served with celeriac remoulade, lovage and a cider tempura oyster. One half

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Black pudding hash.



Delicious Mediterranean-style pasta.



Cotswold lamb rump.



Dark chocolate torte.



Inside and outside, The Trout is delightful.



A comfortable room at The Trout.



There is room to stretch out.



Dining outside in the summer months.

makes its way onto to my plate, while I pass over a perfectly pink cube of Cotswold lamb rump, some parsnip and charred cabbage, and scoopful of pearl barely goat's cheese. Our silence is testament to the quality of the food.

As caramel fans, we can't resist the classic sticky toffee pudding for dessert, with its sweet Butterscotch sauce and smooth vanilla bean ice cream, but we also sample the dark chocolate torte, served with incredible whipped peanut butter and salted caramel ice cream. Both finishers are simply heavenly. "That peanut butter..." says Caroline, waving her fork near a faint smear on the plate, "Wow."

Retiring to Prince Nymph, we make our plans for the next day. The Trout may have a remote, peaceful feel, but there's much to do in the area. Downstream from Tadpole Bridge are the wildflower meadows and wading birds of the Chimney Meadows Nature Reserve and across the fields is Bampton, used to film the scenes for the church and streets in *Downton Abbey*. The Thames Path runs by the inn and Buscot Park and Gardens; William Morris' country residence, Kelmscott Manor; and Blenheim Palace are all a short drive away.

Should you follow in our footsteps, though, before you depart, duck down to The Trout's breakfast room and sample the smoked trout, either with scrambled eggs, or in Eggs Royale. Consuming trout at The Trout is a treat not to be missed. ■

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Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire.



The Walled Garden at Buscot Park House in Oxfordshire.

INFO

The Trout at Tadpole Bridge is part of the Epicurean Club, a group of award-winning independent inns dedicated to the finest in British food, comfort and culture, set in idyllic countryside or traditional village locations.

www.epicurean.club