



A NICE MANOR WITH IT

*A family run hotel and restaurant in the Wiltshire countryside serves up the best of British hospitality, from the vegetables grown in its gardens, to the bacon reared and smoked on the premises. **Georgette McCready** explores the newly rebranded Moonraker near Bradford-on-Avon*

When Tudor Hopkins was working at the legendary Connaught in London he learned about hotel and restaurant service at its very finest. He then took that skills set to the Sussex coast where, in The Gallivant beside Camber Sands, he created a relaxed environment where customers could kick off their sandy shoes, find the dog a cosy spot and tuck in to some delicious, fresh food, while enjoying the seemingly artless über-cool surroundings.

Now, happily for us Tudor and his wife Lucy have bought a 500-year-old Wiltshire manor house with its roots in Domesday Bradford-on-Avon, where their delightful hotel and restaurant offers the best of modern British hospitality. Until this month the Old Manor Hotel drew diners and guests rather unassumingly down its long drive at Trowle Common, betwixt Bradford and Trowbridge. But, justly proud of

what they and head chef Matthew Briddon (ex River Café) are doing, they've decided to give the place a stylish rebranding. Coming across the legend of the Wiltshire yokels who told the customs officers they weren't raking their local pond in search of smuggled goods, but hoping to gather in the reflection of the moon, the Hopkins chose The Moonraker as the new name.

The welcome visitors get is like going to visit thoughtful old friends who want you to feel at home. The hotel reception is a dark wood floored hall, with a log fire flickering away. The old steep stairs are reassuringly creaky and the house is furnished with polished dark chests of drawers, antiques and paintings, with gently scented natural candles made by Heaven's Scent of Bradford-on-Avon. On one of the coldest nights of the year we were happy to find every room comfortably warm and more than adequately heated for even the most lizard-like body. There's a snug drawing room stocked with board games where guests can enjoy a game to the homely sound of Radio 4.

There are none of those bossy little signs either, or fiddly little packets of soap. Lucy, who chose the furnishings, has supplied her guests with generous sized re-fillable Neal's Yard Remedies bath and hair products. For those who don't fancy the stairs, or who have dogs with them, there are comfy suites in the converted farm buildings around a courtyard. The restaurant is a

welcoming room with big squashy sofas where you can sit with a drink while reading the short but pithy menu. Starters are around the £6.95 mark, while main courses are priced between £12.95 and £21.95.

Matthew and his kitchen crew are proud of the provenance of the ingredients. The hotel is now self sufficient in herbs and throughout the year freshly grown fruit and veg from the gardens make their way to the tables. There are a couple of Gloucester Old Spot pigs in the grounds, destined to make some delicious bacon and other pork dishes and, from April there'll be some hens scratching about beyond the formal gardens to provide eggs. Tudor tells me they have their eye on a sheltered spot for a polytunnel where

A WILTSHIRE WELCOME: Lucy and Tudor Hopkins with the hotel dog, Camber. Below, The Smokery and the Rose archway





ATTENTION TO DETAIL: a log fire, polished tables and comfortable chairs in the restaurant and the mellow stone manor house now known as The Moonraker, a splendid grade II listed Georgian hotel

produce such as salad leaves can be raised.

We notice a handsome painted little shed in the garden, Matthew's pride and joy – his smokery. I can vouch for his hay smoked salmon, which is very good served with a creamy apple and celeriac remoulade and bread made in-house. Matthew is to start giving smoking lessons – not the No 6 behind the bike sheds smoking of our youth, but workshops in doing your own home curing, preserving and smoking meat and fish. The three-hour sessions, which include product sampling over lunch and hands-on experience, are from £49 a head.

The Moonraker is currently running an excellent five course tasting menu for £55, which, judging by a Sunday evening, is going down well with the locals. We enjoyed our journey through Matthew's culinary garden of delights – of several stand-out moments was the deeply savoury meaty pork pressé served with a perfectly soft warm boiled egg rolled in breadcrumbs and accompanied by some punchy beer mustard. This was a great combination I'd happily eat any time.

Also moreish was the warm chocolate sponge pudding with an indulgent chocolate pouring sauce and ice cream. ■

READER OFFER

To celebrate the new name The Moonraker is offering our readers the chance to get 20% off their total restaurant bill (including drinks) throughout March and April. Simply quote: The Bath Magazine Wiltshire Moonraker Restaurant Offer when making a booking. Telephone: 01225 777393. The Moonraker, Trowle Common, near Trowbridge, Wiltshire BA14 9BL.



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