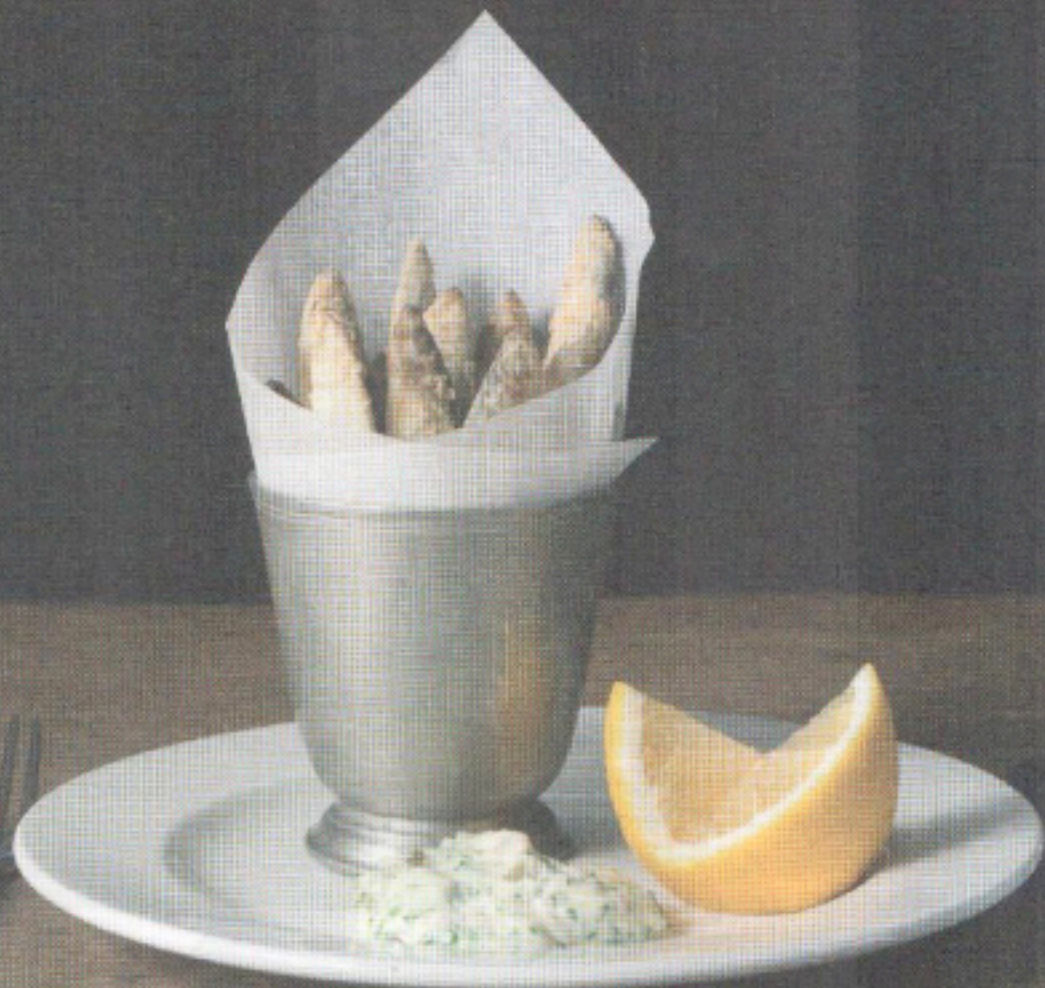


Now the bell tolls

LOOKING FOR A WONDERFULLY ENGLISH EXPERIENCE WITH BEAUTIFULLY COOKED FRESH AND FORAGED FOOD? YOU'LL FIND ALL THIS AND MORE AT THE OLDE BELL INN

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Driving down the sunny country lane into Hurley feels a bit like entering an American tourist's perfect dream of England. I rather expect Hugh Grant to pop out from behind a hedge with a cheery wave. There are big old houses with even bigger gardens and Jags in the driveway everywhere you look. The pub is an old coaching inn and sits in the middle of the pretty village, as it has done since the 12th century. Steeped in history, it was apparently once the site of a plot to overthrow the monarchy and housed meetings involving Churchill and Eisenhower. They would get a shock if they walked in now as it has been recently done up and is interior designed to within an inch of its life. The stylishly rustic interior is a bit like walking into an Englishman's perfect dream of a pub. There are



South East
Fork
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REVIEW

beams on the ceilings and hessian on the floor. Pewter flower jugs sit on big farmhouse tables. Antler chandeliers hang above the muted grey walls, and ancient fireplaces remind you that the place has been here forever.

So far so dreamy, but we're here to check out the food. Which should be just as good as there is a new team in the kitchen with some serious pedigree for a pub. Executive Chef Warren Gerahty has worked in many one and two Michelin-starred restaurants including Chez Nico, Pied à Terre, Restaurant Neat in Cannes and Marco Pierre White's L'Escargot. Head Chef James Ferguson has worked under Gordon Ramsay, Angela Hartnett, Marco Pierre White and was most recently Head Chef at Margot and Fergus Henderson's Rochelle Canteen.

They claim to be cooking food that is seasonal, local and honest, with a passion for wild food and foraging. And indeed the menu is littered with unusual sounding ingredients like pepper wort, wood sorrel and sea purslane. I'm not sure I know what all of them are, but it all sounds rather exotic in a wild and foraged English way.

We sat in one of three booths lining the main dining room. It contains a huge lacquer table, laid with Sheffield silver, while Welsh blankets line the partitions. We were suckered into a pre-starter of oysters with orange and shallot vinegar. I say suckered because you know you don't really ever need a pre-starter, but it seems like a good idea when you see it on a menu. It was either that or the Scottish langoustines with lemon mayonnaise and volkorn rye bread. And no, I don't know what volkorn bread is!

I chose a starter of marinated octopus, butter beans, preserved lemon, radishes and wood sorrel salad, mainly because I hardly ever see octopus on a menu. Which is a shame because octopus is a wonderful thing and I don't know why we don't eat more of it. It was a very pretty plate, the crunchy radish and wispy leaves scattered over the tumble of lemony octopus and beans. I was a bit disappointed to find that the wood sorrel didn't seem to taste of very much, but still, I liked knowing it was there. Mr B's ham hock and foie gras terrine with piccalilli was just as it should be – flakes of moist ham and blocks of creamy foie gras with pretty little dots of homemade piccalilli around the edge.

My whole Torbay sole with brown shrimp, Jersey royals and sea purslane was very good. The fish was fresh and topped with tasty shrimp, the potatoes were buttery and the sea purslane was, well, it was there. I couldn't really taste this either, but it did look nice.

Mr B had the onglet steak, grilled potatoes, watercress, red wine and shallot vinaigrette, ordered because he was happy to

On the menu

Starters

Roasted roots and onions, goats curd, candied walnuts £5.80

Black treacle and dill cured organic sea trout, beetroot and blood orange salad £6.80

Pig's head croquette, crispy pig's ear, mustard and shallot sauce £6.20

Main courses

Spiced aubergine and chickpea stew, creme fraiche £14.80

Grey mullet, globe artichokes, green sauce £17.80

Poace on the bone, cucumber, sea beets, shallot butter £17.20

Braised duck leg, radishes, Jersey royals £16.20

Desserts

Passion fruit pannacotta, fig and chocolate sponge £6.25

Peanut butter parfait, sultana caramel £6.50

Bitter chocolate mousse, rhubarb compote £6.50

Vanilla Cambridge burnt cream £6.25

see onglet on an English menu, a cut of beef beloved by the French but so often ignored over here. It turned up beautifully cooked and cut into seared chunks piled up on top of little crispy potatoes with a deliciously moreish sauce to mop them up in.

The pudding menu reads like a greatest hits of everyone's favourite puddings. My rhubarb trifle came in a glass with a generous base of tangy rhubarb, neatly layered with sponge, jelly, custard and cream and yet more rhubarb on top. It was restrained and elegant and not the usual party in a dish that trifle tends to be, which is probably a good thing at the end of a four-course meal. Mr B's vanilla brulee came with a warm cinnamon doughnut, which was a rather fun addition to a classic dish.

If you don't want to go a la carte, there is a very good value set menu at £12 for two courses or £16.50 for three. On our visit, there were several people taking advantage of this and happily tucking into big bowls of mussels in Cornish cider and yet more sea purslane. Service was friendly and efficient, and there was a huge wine list that we didn't spend much time examining as upfront it had wines of the month, which were perfectly quaffable.

After lunch we were given a tour of the newly planted walled kitchen garden, which the new team have taken over. Once it blooms, they'll be able to step straight out of the kitchen door to pick fresh herbs and vegetables, which certainly brings a whole new meaning to 'local produce'!

Beyond that is the biggest garden I've ever seen in a pub, with a fabulously stylish outdoor eating terrace covered by elegant white umbrellas. It screams 'come and sit in me and drink a Pimms'; which will be a jolly good idea come summer when the newly built outdoor kitchen fires up at weekends. It wasn't in operation when we went but will be by the time you read this. A big rotisserie oven will be roasting chicken and lamb at the weekends and you can also order a picnic, which comes with a wool blanket to spread out in the meadow garden.

With a big enough garden for children to run around in (or you to hide from them in), I can't think of a nicer spot for a very English pub lunch in the country. You never know, you might even spot Hugh Grant taking in a G&T under the willow tree. ☺

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