

Eating out



Sitwell scoffs

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT MUNRO

The Olde Bell

High Street, Hurley, Berkshire. Tel 01628 825881; theoldebell.co.uk

There's a strong smell that emanates from The Olde Bell in Hurley, Maidenhead way. Yes – it reeks of interior decoration. It's a pub dating back to the 12th century that's been put into the hands of some trendy Borough Market-based design company, which has apparently had carte blanche to travel the country – who knows, maybe the world – to source every pewter side plate, curtain cord, goblet and settle throw to create a designer's idea of an authentic English public house. And, by jove, it works.

Every detail, every old photograph in the bar, every inch of every chunky table appealed to the metrosexual within me. If this is the townie's concept of what a country pub should be, then the townies who designed it should be let loose on our hedgerows, woods, and ridge and furrow fields. Rarely have I seen a refurb of something as ancient as The Olde Bell done with such empathy. Every nook and cranny of ye olde place tingles with pleasure at its tender grooming.

Then there's the food. I would like every chef who toils in every Michelin-seeking, butter-laden, fussy, fiddly, too-clever-by-half, broccoli reduced jus of infused pomegranate diver-caught *velouté* of organic sea urchin-inspired eatery to come here to be given a lesson in what good food really is.

But just before that lesson starts, a word about seating. My idea of a table for two is The Olde Bell's idea of a table for two. That is, a chunky, wooden, seven-foot-long kitchen table of a table. With plenty of room for bread, butter, water, wine, flowers and whatever else you might have to put on a table, so you can avoid those moments you get in posh restaurants when the waiters shuffle bits and pieces around to make room for *amuse-bouches* you didn't want. So there's space to gesticulate and you aren't bunched up next to a couple whose conversation you are not remotely interested in but can't help listening to.

Speaking of which, there is one problem with the bar. Because the owners of The Olde Bell reckon it's a pub and pubs cater for communities, they think it's OK for people to share tables in the bar and get on with it. Unfortunately with our disparate, root-free and un-neighbourly society, this doesn't work. People who book a table for two in the bar want just that: they don't want to be given a portion of a larger table.

Really they ought to be on their own seven-foot table in the restaurant, which is where I was cooing as I tasted my companion's smooth and sweet butternut squash soup, ahing as I munched flatbread with ham and Manchego, and ooing at my pork chop, mash and caramelised apple. The latter came with a strip of perfect crackling; the chop itself was the reason pigs were sent to snuffle round this earth.

The bread, by the way, is baked on the premises and is wonderful. You might go to The Olde Bell just to eat the soda bread, which would have 1,000 Irish mothers lining the streets to applaud its authenticity. Pudding was treacle tart. It was the only item I take serious issue with. It managed to be deep, rich, gooey, light and fluffy and came with cream. But it was cold. And they do that on purpose, which is a terrible mistake. And for that heinous crime, The Olde Bell loses a valuable point.

19/20 £25

More restaurants reviewed overleaf



Sitwell scoffed...

Anti-pasti of Spanish ham, Manchego, flatbread and olives

Gloucester Old Spot chop, mash and caramelised apple, top left

Treacle tart, bottom right



The Scoffer reports...

SECOND WAVE

The Scoffer is excited at news that a second Tsunami restaurant has opened in London. There is already a successful branch in Clapham and the new restaurant is located in Charlotte Street. "It offers delicious, modern Japanese cuisine," reports my sushi-watcher. "This place is really making waves."

FOOD CONFUSION

Just when you thought fusion cooking was dead and buried, terrible news arrives. A press release announces that a new Chelsea restaurant, Sushinho, is 'inspired by two very unique cultures... think Latin American chic bred with the efficiency of Japan'. In other words, here comes Japanese-Brazilian fusion.

"I haven't heard of anything quite so silly since the doomed Shumi on St James's," says my recently retired fusion-cooking consultant. "The Italian-Japanese fusion menu there meant having to eat spaghetti with chopsticks."

SOME LIKE IT HOT

In a bid to woo customers who like spice in their burgers, The Scoffer hears, The Grand Union bar and grill chain is launching a fearsomely hot patty called Fired Earth, which is served stuffed with chilli, peppered cheese and jalapeños. "It will come with a health warning - or rather a medical disclaimer. It's served with surgical gloves," says my boy at the grill. "If you have anxiety, asthma, heart or bowel problems, don't even think about it."

Key to ratings

XX/20 WFI score

£ Prices are per person and, unless otherwise stated, are based on the average cost of a three-course, à la carte dinner, not including drinks and service.