



Tuesday, September 27, 2011

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Ring in the olde

Historical Berkshire coaching inn offers a taste of rural England, complete with meadow garden and foraged wild foods

REVIEW
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Sep 23, 2011

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Hurley in Berkshire is the quintessentially English village of holiday postcards and romantic films. It offers picturesque country homes and luxuriant greenery, along with some of the most beautiful stretches of the River Thames. It is only 45 minutes by car from London, and 25 minutes from Heathrow. Bang in the heart of this charming hamlet is the Olde Bell, a hotel and pub dating from the 12th century and reputedly the oldest coaching inn in England.

We arrive just before Sunday lunch and the atmosphere is welcoming and busy. To the right there's a cosy pub with crooked walls, open fireplaces and armchairs; to the left a large dining room with heavy wooden tables, antler chandeliers and high-backed booths draped in bold vintage rugs held by leather saddle belts. The pared down rustic elegance of the interiors is due to British designer Ilse Crawford (of Soho House New York and Babington House fame) who revamped the inn in 2008.



Olde Bell interiors (top and above right); the hotel prides itself on using local produce (above left)

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You can walk from the dining room straight into the Olde Bell's terrace and its piece de resistance - a massive meadow garden filled with wildflowers. This is where the Olde Bell really comes to life, especially when the inn's outdoor summer kitchen serves endless platefuls of roast chicken and pork and delicate summer salads.

The inn is committed to local produce and sustainability. It has fruit cages and a fully functioning vegetable garden. Executive chef Warren Geraghty tells us the inn achieved 25

per cent self-sufficiency this summer and aims to double that next year. He believes in "nature-dictated food", using local produce when it is at its best, and using all the parts of the animal, not just the fashionable cuts. He is also a great proponent of foraged and wild foods, which he thinks adds flavour and a new experience to dishes.

So what of the food? Well, as its seasonal purview dictates, the menu changes almost daily, but think English asparagus with Ragstone goat's cheese and elderflower cream for starters, grey mullet with Jersey Royals and marsh samphire for main (or a more traditional beef roast, replete with Yorkshire pudding and trimmings) and a sorrel pannacotta with strawberries from the garden for dessert. The food is hearty and just a little bit different; it is unfussy but the quality and flavours of the produce, much of which is organic and free range, stand out. Desserts, in particular, are expertly crafted and the wine list is well-conceived, with a sommelier on hand to advise.

After our gigantic lunch we make our way to room number nine in the main inn and take in the dark wooden floorboards, oversized rush matting, working fireplace, massive bed and huge sun-drenched rolltop bath looking onto the green meadow below. The other rooms also offer a blend of country chic and informal glamour, and the Malt House next door has an attractive arts and crafts atmosphere, as well as a private walled garden and a tennis court. The rooms in the other annexes however, though pretty and well turned out, suffer from a terrible lack of views.

Not everything at the Olde Bell is perfect. The breakfast, in my opinion, lacks variety, especially if you're not big on the notion of a cooked English breakfast or kippers, kedgeree (flaked fish) and bloaters (smoked herring). But the breakfast menu, like everything else at the Olde Bell, is constantly evolving. Next year the inn plans to run guided foraging walks by the river, for instance.

The Olde Bell shows no signs of resting on its laurels. And with its scrumptious food, helpful staff, the beauty of the surrounding area, and its location 20 minutes from the foodie mecca of Bray (where Heston Blumenthal's The Fat Duck and Michel Roux's Waterside Inn each have three Michelin stars) will ensure a return visit. In fact, we can't wait to go back.

STAYING THERE

★★★★☆

The Olde Bell

High Street, Hurley, Berkshire, Britain www.theoldebell.co.uk

Doubles from £119 (HK\$1,463) for the B&B. Rates at the Main Inn and Malt House start at £249