



Charmed into submission by a Cotswold classic

The Bell Inn Langford



Dolly Alderton

My favourite writer wasn't very fond of the Cotswolds. He described this slice of Middle England as "desperate slums of snobbery", "florally competitive towns and villages that are twinned with the Joneses", "no hell like this pit of simper, this stain of Virginia creeper, urine-coloured stone and twinkly, antiquified retirement". And as I write this column, well aware that those exquisite sentences once lived here, a part of me wants to agree with AA Gill. Since my parents moved to Gloucestershire from the London

suburbs a few years ago, I've been able to see that the Cotswolds is, in many ways, a deeply unimaginative place. It's genteel postcard England, art-directed by Soho House. Every door unquestioningly painted a uniform grey-green — the middle-class equivalent of biblical lamb's blood on the door for safety. Colonised by anxious Londoners wearing spotless Hunter boots, serving undercooked or overcharred lunches from the unsolvable riddle of their powder-blue Aga. Come for the romance of Laurie Lee, stay for the garden centres stocked with Miller Harris candles. It is rife with the sort of self-satisfaction that led my mother to say indignantly during the Scottish referendum: "Well, maybe I want independence for the Cotswolds!" having lived in Chipping Campden for all of two years.

I'm here for a weekend away with my friend AJ — some much-needed respite from the high heat of the Northern line in July rush hour. After a stagnant

slog down the motorway, we stop at the Bell Inn, in Langford, for a late lunch. Langford fulfils the Cotswoldian prerequisite for chocolate box to the point of saccharine toothache. Every wall is lined with hollyhocks, every windowsill hemmed with geraniums — dancing butterflies circle us as though we're overgrown Disney princesses in shabby sundresses. I almost expect to push the sky and find I'm in the choreographed confines of the set of *The Truman Show*.

With its whitewashed front and hand-painted landlords' names above the door, the Bell Inn is equally picturesque. Inside are dark-green walls, taxidermy fox heads, tweed scatter cushions, all the anthropological evidence of a gastropub, populated by locals holding pints around the England v Sweden match on the screen. It was refurbished and reopened as a pub with rooms in 2017 by Peter Creed and the chef Tom Noest, who have form in their previous endeavours with the Lucky Onion group of boutique pubs and hotels.

Even the waiter's hair is the colour of honeycomb and his skin a butterscotch tan

We sit outside on a bench in the embrace of the strong English sunshine, everything golden — the light bouncing off the houses of Cotswold stone, our glasses of Bulari (the dangerously quaffable, locally produced brut), the puddle of olive oil for sourdough-dunking. Even the waiter's hair is the colour of honeycomb and his skin a butterscotch tan. Just when I think it can't get more idyllic, a rosy-cheeked adolescent gang stride in — *Five Go Wild* in the Jack Wills Sale. They have three dogs, called Pippin, Maisie and Isla. A teenager on a neighbouring bench cheerily informs them, "I know another cocker spaniel called Maisie", with the familiarity of referring to a friend from his cricket team.

We start with wedges of juicy grilled peach, well matched with toasted hazelnuts and dulcet, creamy goat's curd. The shell-pink crab on toast is pleasant if a little too light, both in crabmeat and flavour, lacking a deep crustacean richness. My flexitarian dining partner tries the garlic, parsley and bone-marrow flatbread and delights in the golden rock pools of butter in its dense, half-melted, umami-rich marrow.

For her main course, wood-fired Torbay sole, served whole and on



WHAT'S YOUR POISSON? Whole Torbay sole "abundant with delicate, snowy meat", sea aster and Jersey royals

FROM THE MENU

STARTERS

Dorset brown crab and herb mayonnaise on toast £9

Garlic, parsley and bone-marrow flatbread £5

MAINS

Wood-fired Torbay sole, sea aster and Jersey royals £16

Sea bass with heritage tomatoes, dill, parsley, basil and capers £16

DESSERTS

Panna cotta with strawberries £6

Rice pudding with poached rhubarb £6

DRINKS

Poulton Hill Estate Bulari English Brut £50

TOTAL

For two, including 12.5% service charge £121.50

the bone, abundant with delicate, snowy meat. We share a side order of roasted Jersey royals with a moreish, saline seaweed butter. I am thrilled to see one of the components to my much-revised last meal on earth is on the menu: sea bass with heritage tomatoes. The flesh is light and tender, the skin thick and crisp — a marriage as perfect as Blake Lively and Ryan Reynolds, and as hard to replicate at home. I am nervous on behalf of the tomato salad, as finding the perfect combination of ingredients for one is something I've been committed to for a number of years. The tomatoes are sweet, flecked with gossamer ribbons of sliced shallot; a confetti of dill, parsley, basil and vinegary capers. Every mouthful is, to my mind, heavenly. And I didn't even have to die to eat it (I cannot abide the pedants who say "But I won't have an appetite if I know it's my last meal" when playing this game — the worst kind of party-poopers to have round for dinner).

We order pudding and ask a charming Chipping Norton local for some hoary David Cameron gossip — he tells us about the alleged two slow-moving Range Rovers of security that used to drive behind him when he went for a bike ride in the country lanes. Even sweeter than this tawdry morsel is the panna cotta. Rich, vanilla-bean-freckled, ambrosially satisfying — more of a thick, creamy cake than an unctuous jelly, slicing to look like the white cliffs of Dover. It is accompanied by soft, stewed strawberries — the comforting taste of which reminds me of a childhood kicked off in the late 1980s, when a spongy magenta-pink igloo of summer pudding was always resting in the fridge.

After lunch, we walk back through the village. Past Pashley bicycles, garden gates and greenhouses; window boxes of lavender and a wooden sign on a lawn announcing the time of tomorrow morning's church service. We wind through lanes bathed in the celestial light of the late afternoon, silent but for birdsong and the jubilant roaring of England's victory burbling from televisions and pouring out of open shutters. I concede the inevitable: perhaps I'm more partial to a chocolate box than I'd thought ■ *Marina O'Loughlin is away*

A lot on her plate Three more things Dolly ate last week



MANNA FROM HAVEN

Out for dinner at the well-heeled Babington House, in Somerset, and the cod with pea purée and aioli was delicious — as were the boyband waiters with their West Country accents. babingtonhouse.co.uk



DAIRY TALE

I used to go to Stables Market, in Camden, to drink and dance, then get cheesy chips from the kebab shop on the way home. Nowadays, I head there for truffle cheese fries at the Cheese Bar on a Wednesday afternoon. thecheesebar.com



SCONE NOT FORGOTTEN

One of my favourite pastimes in the summer is to have a dip at the Ladies' Pond on Hampstead Heath, a liberating nudie shower, then a stroll up to Kenwood House for a scone (cream on first). searoykenwoodhouse.co.uk

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