



15c A.D. at The Swan Hotel

Weary travellers have been recharging their batteries at The Swan Hotel since its days as a coaching inn in the 15th century. Now part of the Best Western group, it attracts a well-heeled clientele of international travellers, and many of them can be found in the hotel's dining room, which since the start of summer has been known as 15c A.D.

Open to all-comers, the restaurant offers non-residents a chance to experience the substantial charm of this beautiful medieval hotel. Oak panelled walls, plum velvet high-backed chairs, dimly lit chandeliers and a liberal sprinkling of gilt-framed pictures of swans give the restaurant a stately and opulent air. This is reinforced by the crisply suited, black clad waiting staff whose efficiency is matched only by their friendliness.

Head chef Leigh Say's menu makes the most of Somerset producers and has been awarded two AA rosettes for the last four years running. It is described as traditional and modern British cuisine, but Say's

three years of training in oriental cooking also shines through (do try the breast of Gressingham duck accompanied by a spring roll, bok choy, peach and shimeji mushrooms). Say's presentation is intricate and flawless and the portions are generous, especially for the mains and – hooray! – the puddings. An espresso parfait with pecan caramel brittle comes with an unannounced but very welcome taster of dark chocolate and raspberry tart on the side.

Those into delayed gratification may want to visit in the spring (or wait for a sunny autumnal day) to eat al fresco on the Swan Terrace, which looks directly onto the magnificent western facade of Wells Cathedral, though the interior's warmth makes it an elegant winter retreat too. *RW*

The Best Western Swan Hotel,
Sadler Street, Wells, BA5 2RX.
Tel. 01749 836300.
www.swanhotelwells.co.uk

Sample Menu

Starters

Buffalo mozzarella, heirloom tomato, basil, pesto, £7.50

Yeovil cider marinated sardines, herb croûte, sunblush tomato, lemon oil dressing, £8.75

Mains

Roast breast of corn fed chicken, lemon pepper mash, shallot puree and sherry sauce, £16.80

Gressingham duck breast, peach, bok choy, confit spring roll, shimeji mushrooms, £22

Puds

Somerset strawberries and cream, vanilla shortbread, £6.95

Sticky toffee pudding, butterscotch sauce, caramel fudge ice cream, £6.75



Swan Hotel

It's more than 600 years old and still looking good. LAURA ROWE visits the hotel with possibly the best views in the city

Flick through the *Michelin Guide*, trying to find somewhere to eat in Wells, and the first entry you will find is the Swan on Sadler Street. Indeed, the 15th-century hotel was included in the first *Guide 100* years ago.

So what is it about the hotel and its restaurant that has made it so enduringly popular for the last 600 years? Those who favour the obvious might quite understandably point out its location. Through a hotel-sized gap in the brickwork of Sadler Street, the Swan overlooks the jewel in Wells' crown, the Cathedral. Once just a piece of

grass, this gap is now the hotel's terrace and on sunnier days, as with its secret walled courtyard garden out the back, is heaving with residents, tourists and locals alike.

Inside isn't too shabby either. Recently refurbished, the former posting inn combines its rich history with contemporary boutique-hotel style. In the main restaurant, 15c A.D., for example, the original wood panelling is matched with plush velvet-upholstered chairs, posh wallpaper and clean crisp linen.

We'd, however, managed to bag the prime spot (and our waitress's favourite table) in the front bar – with that awesome view. Good

job too given the torrential rain that was rampering optimistic diners outside. Given the weather we bypassed the snack and summer lunch menus on offer and instead dug straight into the a la carte.

After a recommendation from the waitress (needless to say a pattern was emerging here – I love passionate and knowledgeable staff) we ordered the scallop and cauliflower panna cotta (£8.50), Yeovil cider marinated sardines (£8.75) and the grilled local asparagus (£7.50).

Panna cotta, as lovers of Italian cuisine will know, is normally a pudding of cooked cream with vanilla and often served with

fruit. This, however, was no such thing. And any food that surprises or intrigues in my book is a good thing. The panna cotta, which was a smooth, delicate balance of subtly sweet shellfish and savoury cauliflower, was sandwiched between a crisp of parmesan cheese and another of parma ham. The contrast in texture was really clever, and the powerful flavours from each made for interesting combinations in the mouth.

The asparagus (the last of the season presumably) was a more classic dish of the grilled stalks with a clearly homemade hollandaise sauce, with the addition of some red chard microherbs adding a touch of bitterness. The sardines meanwhile gave a real punch of flavour, smacking you once around the chops with the fish and then once again with the intensity of some sun-blushed tomatoes. A herb croûte and some herbed lemon oil dressing gave it a real taste of the Med.

It's no wonder that the head chef is quite so adventurous, though, given his credentials. Leigh Say has cooked for some of the country's top chefs including Raymond Blanc, Claudia Roden, and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, as well as Claude Bosi at the two Michelin-starred

Hibiscus. And it shows.

Mains were similarly impressive. The roast cushion of lamb (that's a boneless joint taken from the shoulder, £17.95) was full of flavour and incredibly moist. It was served on a bed of smooth, herbed mash alongside some seasonal vegetables (a good variety, too, including peppers, spring onions, carrots and green beans). But our favourite bit had to be the smear of carrot and cardamom purée. It was so delicious in fact that our only fault was that we wanted more of this and less of the fairly ordinary mint butter that was also served on top.

My companion was most impressed with the grilled fillet of pollock (£16.75) – an admirably sustainable and flavourful choice. Firstly it was huge, really meaty, and the skin had been dutifully crisped atop the succulent flakes. It looked as good as it tasted too – thanks to a vibrant pea purée and some bold purple truffle potatoes – presentation is something the Swan excels at. Even the chicken was good (£16.80). I say 'even' because the poor bird can so often be dull, but the roasted breast of corn-fed chicken was exceptionally cooked and tasted of real chicken – not that flabby obese stuff you'll find two-for-£5 at Tesco. The skin was crisp and golden, the meat was moreishy succulent and the accompanying shallot purée provided a sweet, mellow backnote.

Puddings are more traditional (well, if it ain't broke, don't fix it). We shared a sticky toffee pudding (£6.75) and a stack of Somerset strawberries, cream and vanilla shortbread (£6.95, except without the cream – I'm not a big fan of the stuff).



The sardines smacked with flavour

The toffee pudding was very good – or at least I believe it to be so, I barely got a forkful. My companion described it as a light cake, full of dates and with a lovely caramel fudge ice-cream helped no end, too.

The strawberries tasted freshly picked, bursting with summer sweetness and the elegantly pale shortbread had just the right sugary crumble.

The Swan could quite easily rest on its laurels with such a first-class location and I am sure it would still be busy. And yet it doesn't. Head chef Leigh has created an exciting menu and his team are masterful at executing it. Top marks. **WL**

VISITING DETAILS

Opening hours: Mon-Sat 12-2pm, Sunday 12.30-2pm, Mon-Sun 7-9.30pm

We visited: Saturday 12.30pm

Prices: Snack menu from £1-£7.95; Summer lunch menu £4.75-£9.95; a la carte - starters £5-9, mains £14-25, puds £7

Family friendly? A children's menu is available

Disabled access: Yes

Wine list: A concise selection by glass; extensive and varied choice by bottle

Service and atmosphere: Informed and attentive service, with a holiday atmosphere

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The walled garden terrace