

At the Head of the Table

Unpretentious cooking dished in style, that's what the restaurant at the King's Head in Cirencester is all about. Giselle Whiteaker dines at this recently refurbished gem.

The bar at the Kings Head in Cirencester is buzzing, clusters of well-dressed punters gripping ales and lush cocktails, when my friend Daniel and I meet for a pre-dinner drink. A few stray guests have moseyed into the lounge off the reception area and sit propped up on plush couches, murmuring in low voices. We find a quiet corner and sip on glasses of crisp sauvignon blanc, a delight after a busy work week.

We are greeted warmly when we make our way to the open-plan restaurant at the rear of the bar and led to a corner table, where we have a view of the chefs industriously whizzing around the open kitchen. We're not sure what to expect from the Kings Head, which underwent an eight-year renovation programme to turn it into the luxurious haven it now is, addressing decades of neglect to the historic fabric of the former coaching inn. My room is the epitome of comfort, with only the timber frame and slightly crooked floors belying the hotel's heritage. I'd been particularly happy with the unusual welcome waiting for me on the desk – a small bottle of Sibling Gin, made in nearby Cheltenham, Fever Tree tonic, ice and three wooden containers in concentric sizes, containing mixed nuts, orange slices and olives. G&T is always a good opener.

The restaurant is an informal yet attentive space that aims to showcase the best of British cooking through seasonal produce, often making use of Robata-style grilling. Tucked away in quieter areas of the hotel are several private dining spaces, too, including the cellar, with a glass-walled wine display, the library, the panel



Pan fried scallops with rhubarb

room, and the vaulted cellar, catering for anything from intimate dinner parties to events for over 100 people. Our party of two, though, is intrigued by the people watching – tonight's guests run the age gamut and sit in groups ranging from two to six.



The menu is divided into two categories; Something Simple and Something Special, covering the spectrum of dishes from gastropub fare such as burgers and fish and chips to more upscale options such as smoked Cornish mackerel, pigeon and line-caught Stone bass. For starters, we decide to share an item from each side of the menu; a simple Scotch Egg and Scallops.

When the plates are placed before us, neither dish appears simple. The scallops are paired with forced rhubarb, which the waiter explains is rhubarb grown in sheds, making it more tender than rhubarb grown outdoors in summer, and curly endive. Lightly seared, the fleshy crustaceans are highlighted by the contrasting brown and white stoneware on which they sit. The slightly sour salmon-coloured rhubarb cuts through the sweetness of the buttery scallops, which are perfectly seared, golden on the outside with a creamy centre. The Scotch Eggs are a visually dramatic dish, the sun-yellow duck-egg yolks popping from the black pudding crust. Served with sweet relish and a dollop of homemade salad cream, they are delectable.

Our mains are both something special. Naturally, the pork is local – Gloucestershire Old Sport Pork – and it is

served three ways; rack, belly, and brawn croquette, with savoy cabbage and bacon puree, black pudding, grelot onions and a cider jus. The rack is cooked to the point of succulent tenderness, the belly is served roulade style, and the unusual brawn has a mouth-watering crunch on the outside.



The duck has flown a little further to land on the plate, hailing from Merrifield Farm in Devonshire. The Creedy Carver duck breast slices reveal the delicate pink centre and artful splodges of carrot and caraway puree dot the plate, along with wedges of heritage



Vaulted cellar room

beetroot and a smear of juniper berry sauce. The breast slices rest on a disc of fondant potato, Swiss chard and confit duck leg, the entirety looking like a creation from the palette of Pablo Picasso.

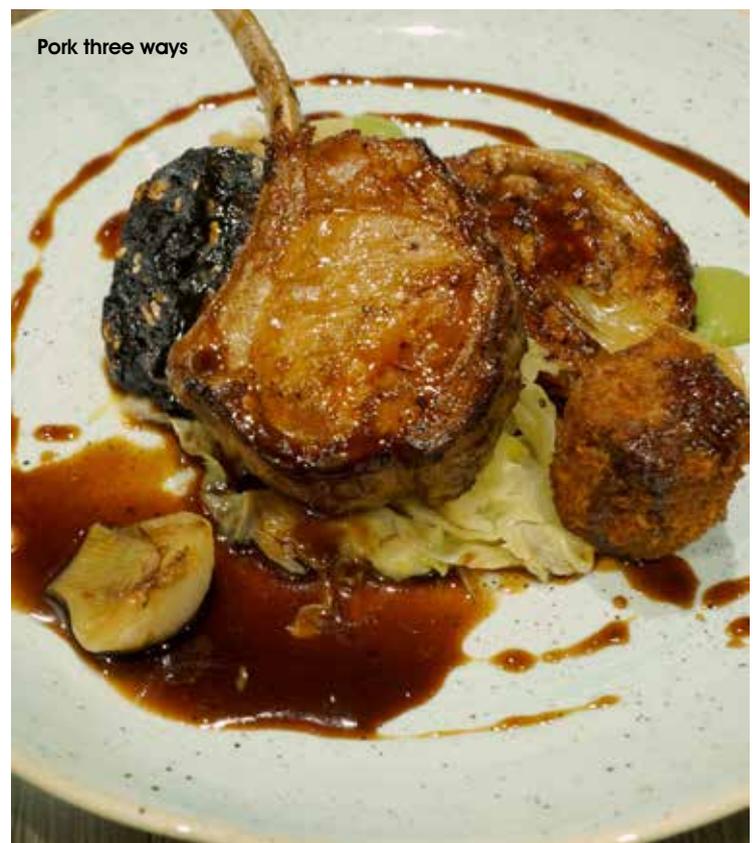
“Wait until you see the desserts. Our pastry chef is something special,” says the waiter when we compliment him on the presentation. As a chocaholic, Daniel insists we order Chocolate, while I vote for the Carrot Cake and we soon discover our waiter is right: both desserts are spectacular. The carrot cake is deconstructed. A spear of vanilla cream is moored in place by toffee and topped with vanilla ice-cream. The accompanying carrot sponge is a vibrant orange, with big air bubbles that make it light and fluffy, and candied walnuts provide crunch, while wafers of delicate toffee give the dish height. What could be better? Chocolate, perhaps?

The chocolate is layered, starting with a honeycomb laced chocolate base, topped with green tea sponge. Creamy milk chocolate swirls prop up the top layer of chocolate and a scoop of chocolate ice-cream holds a swirl of dark chocolate ribbon in place. Fresh raspberries and pistachio crumbles add to the overall effect and the flavours are simply delicious.

There’s a reason the King’s Head ranked tenth as a newcomer hotel in the 2015 Smith Hotel Awards. It’s more than the sum of its facilities, lovely though they may be. It’s the feeling that every guest leaves with, of being special, whether they came to relax in the spa, stay overnight, try one of the signature cocktails at the bar, or dine on exceptional fare. ■



Stone Bass



Pork three ways

To make a booking at the King’s Head, whether for dinner or an overnight stay, see: kingshead-hotel.co.uk

Creedy Duck

Ingredients

Duck legs
 Duck breasts
 Heritage beetroots
 Carrots
 Potatoes
 Cream
 Thyme
 Onions
 Celery
 Garlic
 Junipers
 Rainbow Chard
 Vegetable stock
 Seasoning
 Salt
 Brown sugar

Method

Confit the duck legs using duck fat, garlic, thyme and rosemary for about two and a half hours until the meat falls off the bone.

Trim the duck breasts and render the fat off by scoring the skin and placing under a high heat until the fat melts away. Place the rendered breast into a sous vide bag with thyme and seasoning and cook in the water bath for around 25 minutes at a temperature of 62.5 degrees.

Bake the whole heritage beetroots in salt, by placing salt into tin foil, the beetroot on top, and then sealing the beetroot with the tin foil – place this in an oven and bake for around four hours. Chop into small cubes just before service.

Finely peel and slice carrots and slowly cook with cream until soft, then blend to make a puree and season. Cut and barrel potatoes and fry in foaming butter for about 5 – 7 minutes on each side, adding a little stock to the pan and continue to cook until soft and golden.

Grate beetroot and cook in a little vegetable stock, then reduce with brown sugar and thyme until sticky.

Make a cooking liquor by cooking down duck trimmings, onions, carrots, celery and garlic. When soft add sherry vinegar and red wine and reduce. Add this liquor to a duck stock (made from the bones) and reduce the whole mixture down by a third adding junipers.

Put a swipe of the beetroot sauce onto a plate, then add some of the confit duck, which should be warmed through with some rainbow chard. Add on the carrot puree and fondant potato and finish the duck breast by frying in some butter until the skin is crispy but the duck is still pink – place the breast onto the plate with some of the butter and then add the beetroot (chopped) and finish with the duck jus.

