

Ducking into Aylesbury

Once known for the rearing of Aylesbury ducks, the Vale of Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire is a land of gently rolling greenery. If it's peace you're after, there's no better place to find it. Giselle Whiteaker seeks serenity at Hartwell House.

A view of Hartwell House from the lake

The waiter places two martini glasses on the rounded coffee table by our knees in the baroque Great Hall of Hartwell House, in the Vale of Aylesbury. "Aylesbury Duck Vodka," he says, backing away with a mischievous glint in his eye. My mother Judy and I glance at each other over the rim of the glasses. "Here's to Hartwell House," Judy says and after a gentle clink we each take a sip of the straight vodka, anticipating a trail of fire to line our throats. There's no such burn. The fluid is surprisingly smooth, sliding down to warm the belly, the perfect aperitif for the Aylesbury Duck Dinner to follow.

It's no shock to discover that the Aylesbury duck hails from these parts that share its name. In the 18th Century, selective breeding of the common duck – most likely a mallard – resulted in this well-liked bird.

In parts of Buckinghamshire they were bred on an extensive scale in the homes of cottagers. According to *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, 1861: "Round the walls of the living rooms, and of the bedroom even, are fixed rows of wooden boxes, lined with hay; and it is the business of the wife and children to nurse and comfort the feathered lodgers...To be perfect, the Aylesbury duck should be plump, pure white, with yellow feet and a flesh coloured beak."

At its peak, it is recorded that over one tonne of ducks were regularly taken by train to the London markets. Then in 1910 came a decline, with the introduction of incubators and artificial rearing methods. Despite this, a cross breed of the Aylesbury and the Chinese Pekin duck is still the basis for the

table duck market, although these are primarily reared in other counties. The Real Aylesbury duck is a somewhat rare breed, but this is the place to find them: in all three savoury courses of the Aylesbury Duck Menu.

We are led from the drawing room into the dining room of the magnificent property, with its soaring ceilings and period features. The windows open out onto an expanse of verdant green lawn and in the distance, cows graze contentedly. Within moments, our first course arrives. A perfectly formed braised duck ravioli sits on a mound of pickled beetroot and the waiter smoothly pours Aylesbury duck consommé into the bowl with a flourish. The rich duck and tangy beetroot alone could have been too much, but the consommé is so light that it leads the pair to meet in the middle.

The second course sees a crispy Aylesbury duck leg resting on pea puree and a pea shoot salad. A delightfully crunchy minted pea fritter adds fresh zing to the tender meat, the smooth puree leaving a sweet aftertaste. The duck finale, however, is yet to come.

The Aylesbury duck with fennel flavoured potatoes, citrus soused fennel, English asparagus and orange sauce is a fresh take on duck à l'Orange. The pink, juicy duck meat is undoubtedly the star of the dish, but I am intrigued by the creative citrus-use by head chef Daniel Richardson, with a subtle orange sauce, fresh mandarin wedges and a candied orange slice. One incredibly fluffy cherry soufflé later and we are satiated, ready to call it a night.

We stroll along the hallway and up the resplendent staircase, flanked by a series of 400-year old carved



The Great Hall



Hartwell House, South Lawn



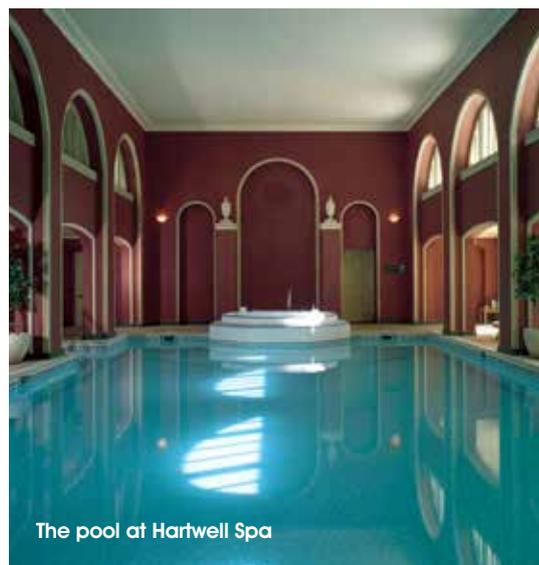
wooden figures rescued from the cellars when the house was restored. Winston Churchill makes an appearance on one of the balusters, indicating a more modern addition and a certain quirkiness, prevalent within the National Trust property now managed by Historic House Hotels. Our room, a Royal Double, lives up to its name. The high-ceilinged, generously proportioned room features a host of traditional touches and is dotted with antiques, also sporting lovely views across the grounds. This is not an ordinary hotel. It is more like stepping back in time to visit friends at their country house.

The Grade I-listed property, standing in 90 acres of landscaped park laid out by a contemporary of Lancelot 'Capability' Brown, dates from the 17th Century. Combining Jacobean and Georgian features, it's large and impressive, but not overwhelming. There are numerous spaces – the library, drawing room and morning room to name a few – that invite relaxation and that's without mentioning the Hartwell Spa, in a separate building modelled on an orangery, with its luxurious swimming pool, steam room, sauna, small gymnasium, café and treatment rooms. My first stop after checking in was there, where therapist Alice revitalised my senses with an Ultimate Aromatherapy Experience massage, her probing knuckles releasing the tension and stress of a busy week. I was tempted to book in for more, but instead started the day with a refreshing dip in the pool before breakfast.

Today, we've not been blessed not blessed with the best of days. The sun has gone into hiding and ominous grey clouds are building. Undeterred, we borrow an enormous umbrella and set off for a walk around the grounds, stumbling upon several of the 18th-century pavilions and monuments that grace partially-hidden garden enclaves. The former classical garden was destroyed in 1738 to make way for the landscape garden now in existence, but a number of the original buildings still exist, giving the garden authentic character. It's lush and green, with pretty flower beds providing bursts of colour.

As we circle the lake, two geese herd their brood of goslings into the water and cows peer curiously at us over paddock fences, where they stretch upwards to nibble on low-lying leafy boughs. A squirrel bounds across the lawn in short leaps as we pass the façade of the Gothic Revival church, built by Henry Keene in 1752. Even the drizzle does nothing to diminish the loveliness of this setting.

After a light lunch in the Spa Café and Bar, it's time to leave. The sun is tentatively peeking out from behind the clouds as we wend our way back to reality. Outside Hartwell House's gates, the world is still spinning, but here time is slower, calmer, tranquil. It's the ideal spot for a break from the everyday. ■



The pool at Hartwell Spa



Crispy Aylesbury duck leg



Head Chef Daniel Richardson

For more information about Hartwell House or to make a booking at this lovely hideaway in Aylesbury, see: www.hartwell-house.com.