



Country-house charm

Set in 1,415 hectares of parkland on the edge of the stunning Blackdown Hills in Devon, is the Grade I-listed Combe House, located near Gittisham, once described by Prince Charles as 'the ideal English village'. At the end of a long private drive of several hundred metres, you'll happen upon this refreshingly unreconstructed, unmanufactured manor house. After navigating around roaming pheasants, cattle and Arabian horses, we crunched across the pearl gravel to enter a world that seemed to cross over the threshold into a golden era.

Sumptuous furnishings, old-school service, oak panelling, oil paintings, stags' heads and roaring fires set the scene. The public and private rooms are individual and carefully decorated with antiques, fresh flowers and rich fabrics. The hotel, the service and the food have won a plethora of awards from Johansens, the RAC, the AA, and Good Food and Good Hotel Guides. Most recently, Combe House was joint international winner of the Best Country House Hotel (with Castle Leslie in Ireland) with *The Sunday Times Travel Magazine* Editor's Choice Award 2004.

The restaurant consists of two light, airy but intimate, dining rooms decorated with chandeliers and beautifully hand-painted walls. Philip Leach (Master Chef of Great Britain 2000), who previously helped Peter Gorton at the Horn of Plenty, Tavistock, win his Michelin star, now weaves his culinary magic as head chef, drawing from Devon's extensive larder. The cellar has some 200 well-chosen bottles sourced from across the world's major wine regions, but with a particular focus on France (it has an excellent range of Chablis) and Australia (owners Ruth and Ken Hunt spent 16 years Down Under). The prices run from £9 (half-bottle) to £1,800, with the

majority in the £18 to £30 bracket. Eight wines are served by the glass. What was most interesting was not the Pétus 1982 (a bargain at £1,800 – compared to double that at Gordon Ramsay's namesake establishment in London), but the varied and interesting list of some 50 quality half-bottles, which made matching with each course – each dish, even – a practical and cost-effective option. More than 90% of the wines are supplied from local merchant Christopher Piper (IWC South West Merchant of the Year 2004) and supplemented with wines from Corney & Barrow and other London merchants.

Eric, one of the excellent senior front-of-house team, demonstrated his knowledge and passion for wine (as did Ken Hunt), recommending and discussing at length the suitability of certain wines and matching to certain foods. Even the waiting staff – warm, hospitable, professional – showed an unexpected knowledge of the wines in the context of the food they served.

The canapés, including black olive tapenade beignet, salmon and halibut tart and cheese straws, were paired with a half-bottle of Chambolle-Musigny Clos du Village Domaine Guyon 1995 (£34.80): perfectly mature and drinking fabulously well, its truffled, almost gamey notes matched with ripe fruit and a strong vein of balancing acidity.

For starters we chose local rabbit pie with roasted beetroot and red mullet à la Grecque with caponata, tapenade and Parmesan tuile. The mullet was beautifully fresh, holding its own against the fresh Italian flavours of the sweet and sour caponata, and the dish was offset with a good, salty tapenade. With such an excellent choice of half-bottles, we were able to match the lighter nature of the dishes with a fresh, well-made and very contemporary Albariño Lagar de Cevera from Lagar de Fernelos (£13.60).

We paired the main course (roast haunch of venison and maple and caraway glazed pork tenderloin) with a half-bottle of the excellent Gigondas Domaine les Pallieres 1999 (£17.70). Still young and improving, the sturdy but approachable tannins and chunky black, stoned fruit and all-spice counterpunched the rich sweetness of both dishes well. The main courses were served with delicious vegetables as part of the plate; in particular, the pork came with a mash that was potato rather than cream-led, as well as some delicious chard. The venison was young and had a good flavour without being overpowering. It was also meltingly tender.

To match our desserts – a vanilla pannacotta, poached winter fruits in a red wine and Port liquor and a selection of West Country cheeses – we settled for a satisfying, if middle-of-the-road, 10 Year Old tawny.

The dinner was a perfect example of a chef who knows his ingredients and is not afraid to let their flavours and textures speak for themselves; each dish was expertly balanced and the combination made for an extremely satisfying meal.

A quiet coffee by the roaring fire and then climbing the broad stairs for one of the stately bedrooms was all that was left to complete a thoroughly indulgent mix of eating, drinking and relaxing in the country.

MARK LANE

Combe House

Gittisham, Honiton, nr Exeter, Devon EX14 3AD

Tel: +44 (0)1404 540 400; www.thishotel.com

Dinner per head: £36

Restaurant: ★★★★★

Wine List: ★★★★★



Eat and drink yourself Scilly

Now I understand what Americans mean when they say England is quaint and small. The Scilly Isles are to England what England is to America: everything is slightly smaller and more perfectly formed. There are few places so familiar yet quite so far apart and just ever so wonderfully different. I encountered new plants and birds and, like its crystal clear warm winds, the Scilly Isles blew me away.

The Star Castle Hotel was built in the time of Drake and at the zenith of English sea power – its eight-pointed bastions were built as a defence against cannons. It is now one of the top hotels on the Isles, with 12 rooms in the castle and more in its two-hectare sub-tropical gardens which boast a 360-degree view of the archipelago that makes up England's smallest Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. I went in late February, when the Gulf Stream allowed for just a tee-shirt: in stark contrast to the damp, dark and brooding mass of the mainland, 45km across the Atlantic Ocean. The white sands, blue seas and sky were closer to the Caicos than to Cornwall.

The setting reflects the high quality but uncomplicated nature of the food and wine at the hotel. The wines on the 130-strong list are selected for typicity and readiness to drink. Most major wine regions are represented, but France and Australia share the limelight. Prices run from £15 for the house wine to a modest £49 for Delas's Côte-Rôtie Seigneur de Maugiron. The average price is £22. The menu changes on a regular basis, depending on seasonal availability. Due to the tiny nature of the islands, apart from the local seafood, most produce is shipped in from Cornwall.

My visit coincided with a specially themed, but not obligatory, wine weekend. This was a pilot event and brainchild of hotelier Robert Francis. Hopefully, there are more in the pipeline (check the website for details of upcoming special weekends). Some of the wines were flown in; many came from the Star Castle's existing stock.

Preceding dinner on each of the three evenings was a blind tasting of the wines recommended for that meal, allowing each guest to wine match, study the menu and ask questions without preconception obstructing preference. Thirty wines were offered against the three menus. Each menu consisted of three starters, two *amuse bouches*, four main courses, and a selection of desserts and cheeses. The format allowed for guests to taste, match and learn in a relaxed and informal environment, and to build their knowledge and experience over three evenings. Vegetarians were also admirably catered for.

The first night focused around 'Light and White': fizz, unoaked white wines, seafood and white meat. This was an excellent way to start the weekend, in keeping with the strong link the islands have with the sea. My favourite pairing for this meal was the seared scallops and lobster on spinach and mango salad with Jim Barry's Watervale Riesling 2002 from South Australia's Clare Valley. The steely acidity, lime-zestiness and floral aromatics of the wine counterpointed the rich flavour but light texture of the scallops and lobster.

The second evening, 'Burgundy Madness', focused on the international appeal of Pinot Noir matched with lightly hung game and fowl. This allowed guests to get to grips with the natural affinity of the grape and this earthy food. It was a

real treat to be able to select and match such a bounty of game; preference was difficult, for they all worked well. The real winner was whole-roasted stuffed quail filled with black pudding served with roasted shallots and the Nuit-Saint-Georges 1er Cru Clos des Forêts Saint-George Domaine de L'Arlot 1999. Most of the guests went for the less austere and more upfront, super-ripe flavours of an excellent Paul Conti Pinot Noir 2001 from Western Australia that wrapped itself perfectly around the full, earthy flavours of the quail.

The final evening was approached with both sadness and excitement; 'Big and Bold' was the theme in which the 'flying-grapes' of Bordeaux vied for dominance over their travelling Rhône cousins. I took the theme of the evening to heart by selecting the meltingly delicious pan-roasted fillet of beef topped with a Stilton and hazelnut crust served with spiced spinach and green peppercorn sauce. This dish offered a challenging juxtaposition of flavours for any wine: meat juices, blue cheese, roasted nuts, irony spinach and spicy pepper. The Vasse Felix Cabernet Merlot 2001 again from Western Australia performed surprisingly well – its cassis and currant leaf was spikey enough to cut through the big flavours of the dish. However, my real preference was two very different interpretations of Rhône-style blends. One of them was the immediately beguiling, rich, concentrated, spicy Pic Saint-Loup Domaine L'Hortus 2001 from the Languedoc in southern France that married perfectly with the dish, the other was the Barossa Valley's exceptional Yalumba GSM (Grenache, Shiraz, Mourvèdre) 2002, but it just dropped shy of winning because of its youth.

The high standard of cooking, accessible selection of wine, relaxed atmosphere of the hotel, infectious charm of the staff and the stunning beauty of the location were all compelling ingredients. No wonder so many return. I will.

MARK LANE

Star Castle Hotel

St Mary's, Isles of Scilly TR21 0TA, UK

Tel: +44(0)1720 422317; www.star-castle.co.uk

Dinner per head: £30 (excluding wine)

Restaurant: ★★★★★

Wine List: ★★★★★

Moreish fare by the moors

Nestling between Dartmoor and Bodmin Moor lies 16th-century inn The Harris Arms. Over the past year, new owners, Andy and Rowena Whiteman, have significantly raised the hospitality standard, resulting in the pub being finalist or winner of various trade awards, including Newcomer of the Year and Wine Offering of the Year (*The Publican*), as well as being *Devon Life's* Devon Country Pub of The Year 2004. Next on the to-do list, I was told, is the décor; and admittedly, much could be done.

Cornish chef Tim Treseder produces honest food in a fine paysan style. Whilst not scaling any creative culinary heights, the food is solid, hearty, and seasonal, and is made from quality produce. The kitchen's raw ingredients pay homage to local sourcing: meat is from Launceston, fish from Port Isaac, and cheese from Tavistock. The short menu changes regularly and the Whitemans also host themed food and drink events.

The wine list is just 55 bottles (only two sparkling), with half of these available by the glass. The list balances Old and New World with an emphasis on France and the Antipodes. Italians and Chileans are represented as well as the occasional South African, Austrian and Spaniard. The list has three main sections: the 18 House Wines are all available by the glass and range from £11 to £16.50 per bottle; the 15 Special Selection wines go for £14 to £22 and the 22 Fine and Interesting wines start from £28 and creep up to £150 for the Robert Parker 100-pointer Torbreck Run Rig 1997.

What sets this list apart is the wines by the glass matched to the proven tasting ability of the Whitemans (both have been judges at the International Wine Challenge and were awarded

winemakers in New Zealand). Throughout the list, the quality is excellent and the mark-ups are very conservative: those above £25 have a fixed mark-up encouraging you to trade up for even better value. The main flaw is the paucity of wines with useful bottle age. May this develop with time!

As an aperitif we chose a Tarapaca Sauvignon Blanc 2003 from Chile's Maipo Valley (£2.80 per glass). It was poised, but full-fruited, with racy acidity and a mineral edge. The Italian Pinot Grigio Vigneti Delle Dolomiti Mezzocorona 2003 (£3.40) was fatter and more aromatic than many Italian PGs but with a balancing acidity which keeps it fresh and moreish.

The starter of home-cured gravadlax with horseradish mayonnaise and crostini (£6.95) was fresh and light. Griddled tiger prawns with toasted pine nuts and aioli (£7.50) were fine, if uninspiring. The dishes were paired with a Grüner Veltliner 2003 from Austria's Bernard Ott (£18.95). It was a bit too young but was awash with aromas of white pepper and fruit salad. Given further age, it should develop a more complex, nutty, oily, richer tone.

The main courses were primarily meat-led: a fillet of local Devon Red beef with a fresh mixed leaf salad (£14.95) and pan-fried pheasant with local, cured rashers on a bed of celar-lac mash with roasted winter root vegetables dressed in a madeira jus (£9.50). The game had been lightly hung for a milder flavour and the earthy flavours of the root vegetables and the rich madeira jus made a near-perfect winter dish. The Chianti was the high-point of the meal: Tentazione 1996 IGT Fattoria Vignale (£35). Imported by the Whitemans back in 1998, it's a blend of Cabernet (60%) and Sangiovese (40%).

Mature, complex, balanced and elegant (but with presence), it wrapped around the flavours of the food and elevated our dining experience to a different level.

The desserts were generous. The lightly warmed treacle tart with vanilla ice-cream was good, if over zealous with the orange peel. The cheese board was enormous and the local cheeses were in perfect condition. This was paired with a half bottle of Suduiraut 1996 Sauternes (£24.50). Delicious, delicate, elegant but still short on maturity.

The Harris Arms package is good but not complete – décor and more bottle-aged wine would give it a real edge.

MARK LANE



The Harris Arms

Portgate, Lewdown, Okehampton, Devon EX20 4PZ

Tel: +44 (0)1566 783331; www.theharrisarms.co.uk

Dinner per head: £30 (excluding wine)

Restaurant: ★★☆☆☆

Wine List: ★★☆☆☆

Fallen angel

The scene was set for a romantic gastronomic experience. Dartmouth is one of the loveliest locations in England's south west – even a dark and damp winter evening failed to mask its charm. The New Angel, set on two floors, is modern, austere and, considering the highly decorative exterior (c.1894), slightly incongruous. Downstairs, the open-plan kitchen was already a hive of activity and although upstairs began a little quiet, it soon filled up. It was good to see John Burton Race (pictured) in control of the kitchen and not as another absent chef.

The food menu was short and simple with ingredients being, where possible, locally sourced. It catered for a full spectrum of both tastes and wallets.

The wine list was fairly short: roughly 60 bottles hailed from France, 20 were from elsewhere in Europe, (a Portuguese Douro Red was listed as Spanish!), with the New World squeezed into the remaining 30. The list is not exceptionally deep in terms of interest or maturity but there are six whites, one fizz and five reds by the glass (175ml or 250ml) that cater for short pockets. What made a fairly mixed list a real disappointment (poor glassware aside) though, was the staff's overall low level of confidence and very variable wine knowledge: the ability to advise with any conviction on matching their wines with their menu was worse – the assistance offered was shaky or non-existent.

As an aperitif we chose a typical, if simple, Saumur Blanc – Le Cabriole 2003 from Cave de Saumur (£3.75/175ml) and a good, racy, steely Domaine de Vauroux Chablis 2002 (£7.50/175ml). For starters we had excellent fillets of soused



Slapton mackerel served with sour cream (£6.50) and a lovely warm salad of black pudding, apple, foie gras and hazelnuts (£15). The Château l'Oiselinière de la Ramée 2003 Muscadet Sèvre-et-Maine Sur Lie (£5/175ml) was, against better judgment, paired with the mackerel (their Alsatian Pinot Blanc by the glass may have matched the boldness of the oily fish more convincingly). A Coteaux du Languedoc rosé – Domaine du Poujol 2003 (£4.25/175ml) – was paired with the foie gras, which also fell short in terms of character and matching.

The result of the staff's mismatched pairing was that both wines came across rather dull and characterless. This was a shame because the food was near perfect – the foie gras was possibly the best tasted this side of the Channel, and I was reminded just how good a humble mackerel can be.

Our main course choices were home-smoked haddock on a bed of spinach, topped with hen's egg, glazed with cheese sauce (£14.50) and fillet of Blackawton lamb, mustard and herb crust, tyme and tomato sauce (£19). The dishes were deliberately challenging for a wine match, but

this time we were the ones choosing so had more faith. We opted for the Domaine Du Moulin Neuf Danjean-Berthouix 2003 (£34). The wine arrived at an unfortunately high temperature that killed some of the wine's most beguiling characteristics. A request for an ice-bucket to take it down five or six degrees was met with some consternation.

Once at a temperature that gave it back its rustic structure, the wine's acidity and its fresh cherry and summer red-fruit compote flavours balanced out the alcohol – it was a good choice for both dishes, which were a class apart (excellent fish, disappointing meat). It was another surprise to find that no vegetables were offered (either on the menu, or verbally) to accompany the mains, so we requested a salad promptly but it was a shame to see it looking suspiciously like a packet salad with no thought having gone into it at all.

As we were not sated, the dessert menu was eagerly grasped. Sadly, these seemed to be another shortcut – mainly pre-prepared tarts or ice cream all at the rather aspirational price of £7.50. In light of this, we opted for coffee.

In short, the New Angel has a magical location and some excellent dishes but is crucially let down by others, as well as the wine list and service in several very important areas.

The New Angel

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Tel: +44 (0)1803 839 425; www.thenewangel.co.uk

Dinner per head: £34 (excluding wine)

Restaurant: ★★☆☆☆

Wine List: ★★☆☆☆