

The Inn at Fossebridge

Quality (and quantity) in the heart of the Cotswolds that will satisfy even the most ardent of pub traditionalists. Words by **LAURA ROWE**

NOWADAYS IT'S A rare restaurant that keeps a dish on its menu for *two months*, let alone two years. So trendy is seasonal, field-to-fork eating that should you even whisper at a kumquat, or serve up a cucumber during the winter, then the fear is you'll be chased out of the kitchen by enraged foodies, possibly wielding pitch forks. But when something is *that* good, why would you make your punters wait?

The Fossebridge Scotch egg (£6.50) is one dish that works all year round. Found at The Inn at Fossebridge, on the outskirts of Cirencester, it's been sitting smug on the menu for 24 months and counting. And I'll tell you for why: it's McDreamy, the rough-round-the-edges, ever-so-slightly-naughty-but-you-can't-resist of pub snacks. Sliced open to reveal an amber pool of duck yolk (far creamier than plain old hen's) and perfectly set whites, the eggs are wrapped in a delicious pork meat, sage and prune mix, and crowned with a golden crispy crumb. Samantha, owner of the former 17th-century coaching inn, says that they used to use eggs from their own flock of ducks (that'll be thanks to the Inn's own babbling portion of the River Coln, which runs alongside it) but a nasty fox went on a killing spree at the start of the summer. They plan to rebuild next year, but in the meantime the eggs are sourced locally.

I was enjoying said public house snaffle with Chef Birch, who couldn't help but marvel over the hotel's great location. There are four acres of gardens, a lake and, of course, it's on one of the Cotswolds main thoroughfares, the Fosseway. There are nine rooms, if you fancied making a weekend of it, a restaurant round the back (open for dinner Thurs-Sat), the boozier, and even a dog-friendly holiday home.

Nursing unintentional hangovers, we huddled in a cosy corner of the pub with hair of the dog – a pint of Otter (the wine list is pretty impressive too, and serves by the carafe) – while making quick work of the confit duck

leg and pork belly terrine (£7). Presented on a wooden chopping board, it was a lesson in multiple disciplines. Good ingredients, cooked well, made for a melting meaty spread, which we eagerly piled onto our individual herb brioche. Pickled veg were still al dente, and their sharpness cut through both the rich meat and the delicious creaminess of a seasonal celeriac remoulade.

An 8oz rib eye steak (£22.50) couldn't have been cooked better – burnished tiger stripes from the grill on the outside, rudely crimson flashes in the middle – and was a tasty bit of meat too. "It's from TH Burroughs Family Butchers in Swindon," our waiter told us. It came with all the classic platefellows: proper grilled tomatoes, mushrooms, peppercorn sauce, watercress and a mountain of chippies too. No need for sides here!

Chef Birch's Trawlerman's pie (£16) was awash with salmon, haddock and mussels still clinging with desperate hope to their shells in a creamy parsley sauce, topped with Duchess-style potatoes with Gruyere. These are man-size portions, no doubt, but yet again they came with more – this time a handmade bread roll, mustard butter and Tenderstem broccoli.

Our hangovers were well and truly sorted and unashamed greed had taken over – the desserts just sounded too good to turn down. Needing a good 10 minutes for our stomachs to settle, we ordered the spiced baked banana (£7), which we were forewarned might take some time. It came out promptly though, and caused a raised eyebrow from Chef Birch when we opened a pretty little kilner jar. Wafts of oak smoke rose from a vanilla panna cotta which wobbled with all the cheek of Betty Boop. A chocolate biscuit rubble looked like soil in the bottom of the jar, while edible flowers and microherbs completed the dessert garden look. But what of the baked banana, you might ask? Plonked on the side, it was rather incongruous alongside the delicate panna cotta, but it was lush, sweet and spicy nonetheless, thanks to cloves and cinnamon bark.

This cosy inn comes into its own at this time of year. It boasts roaring fires, the sort of classic English food we all know and love (generously proportioned too), and even a two-mile circular walk which begins and ends in the grounds. Time to dig out the wellies, I reckon, and work up an appetite. ■■■

* THE INN AT FOSSEBRIDGE, Stow Road, Fossebridge, Gloucestershire GL54 3JS; 01285 720721; www.cotswolds-country-pub-hotel.co.uk



Steak with chips and peppercorn sauce, Trawlerman's pie and Scotch eggs – all proper pub food

