

My Review

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Stoke Place is a boutique hotel, a refurbished 17th century manor house, set in 26 acres of attractive grounds (laid out by the famous 18th century garden designer Capability Brown) on a site in the country between Maidenhead, Windsor and Slough. Chef Craig van der Meer is from South Africa, and cooked previously at Langshott Manor in Sussex. The restaurant of the hotel is sited in the appropriately named Garden Room. With a view over the grounds, the room is decorated in modern style with a leafy motif. The menu was priced at £40 for three courses a la carte and £55 for a tasting menu, with a matching flight of six wines £35 extra.

The wine list had 175 bins with broad international coverage, and offered selections such as Catena Malbec 2008 from Mendoza at £34 for a wine you can pick up in the shops for £10, Twelve Clones Pinot Noir 2007 at £58 for a wine that cost around £17 retail, d'Arenberg Dead Arm Shiraz 2006 at a hefty £105 compared to a shop price of around £24, up to prestige wines such as the lovely Opus One 2001 at a relatively generous £300 for a wine that you can buy in the shops for £212. Bread was made from scratch, a choice of white brown and truffle bread, which had pleasant texture (4/10).

Amuse-bouche was yoghurt mousse with pumpkin granola and butternut crisp. This was refreshing and light, with the texture contrast working well (4/10). Beetroot consommé was poured around a central tower of diced potato and leek and goat cheese (Bosworth Ash). The potentially strong flavours of goat cheese and beetroot were quite subdued, allowing the flavour of the nicely cooked potato and leek to come through, but the goat cheese in particular was subtle to the point of disappearance, and the consommé could have had more intense flavour (3/10).

Lobster tortellini was offered with a lobster on the side, with fennel, Pernod jelly and bisque foam. The foam was fine, but the pasta was simply too hard in texture, while the piece of lobster as garnish was somewhat chewy (1/10). This was followed by a somewhat superfluous palate cleanser of gin and tonic sorbet with jelly lime crisp.

The kitchen was on surer ground with pan-seared fillet of beef (from a local farm) as well as beef tongue, a slab of swede, spinach and bordelaise (red wine) sauce. The fillet was tender, the tongue provided a deeper flavour contrast, the spinach was fine and the red wine sauce nicely made (5/10).

The cheese offering here was slightly unusual. A slab of Perl Las (a Welsh blue cheese) was served with a Reblochon cheese ice cream, diced figs, a fig and onion chutney and a Manchega crisp. The chutney was nice and the cheese in good condition, the figs of reasonable quality (4/10).

The next dish was brioche with crisp bacon, rum and raisin ice cream and maple jelly. While each element was capable, I found the combination peculiar, as the bacon combined strangely with the sweetness of the ice cream and jelly in particular. I am not against unusual flavour combinations, but I do think they have to complement each other well, and I am not sure that these did (2/10). There was a rather superfluous palate cleanser of gin and tonic sorbet prior to the main course.

The true dessert was soft (Valrhona) chocolate, peppermint sorbet, peppermint crisp and cardamom foam. The chocolate itself was lovely, rich and delicious, but the peppermint sorbet was for me too strong a flavour, dominating everything else. The peppermint crisp was more restrained, and the cardamom foam added an interesting note (3/10). Coffee (the blend used is "One Coffee") was pleasant, served with four different chocolates. The hazelnut chocolate actually made in the kitchen was noticeably better than the other, serviceable bought-in ones (which were from Damian Alsop).

Overall this was an interesting meal, with modern flavour combinations that mostly worked, though the meal was marred by a couple of technical problems (mainly the lobster dish) and certain ingredient combinations that for me did not work together. The beef dish showed that the kitchen can cook well, and I would suggest the kitchen might be better to focus on taking the good quality ingredients used here and just cooking them nicely, rather than trying to be too innovative. Service from our Polish waiter was very good.