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# In An English Country Garden

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Let's face it, the sense of authority that we enjoy as patrons is one of the attractions of restaurant dining.

Being waited on evokes the feudal exchange between lord and fief. It is no coincidence that the restaurant, as opposed to its precursor the tavern or inn, emerged in France at a time when the bourgeoisie, flush with lucre, were happy to inherit the privileges of a decapitated *ancien regime* – 'Garçon, fetch me soup.'

Despite some egalitarian leanings, I must admit to enjoying the occasional masquerade as a lord – only as a restaurant diner of course – but there are limits; I prefer service to be a little off-hand, jaunty even, to the extent that human characteristics are on display. He or she remains my vassal for the duration of the meal, but one of noble birth. Of course, efficiency is paramount and recalcitrance unthinkable, but an open heart wins me over every time.

Thus I have to admit to being charmed at lunch in **Stoke Place**, Buckinghamshire, by the candidness of a waiter who informed me that 'they moved me from housekeeping three weeks ago, and I don't know why.' But after a meal served diligently and accompanied by an affable manner the reasons he had attained this new status became clear: arise Sir Jakob of the waitery fold, clearing the decadent excesses of hotel guests is no longer for you.

The atmosphere at Stoke Place is undeniably evocative of aristocratic privilege. To the back of the hotel lies a sumptuous lawn with peacocks strutting about before a line of trees gives way to a large artificial lake; on an early summers day this quintessentially English scene of domesticated nature was a sight to melt even the most curmudaeonly.

The design of the dining room skilfully acknowledges the garden by using tiles with representations of wall plants while the furnishing is reminiscent of the hospitality of a country kitchen.

It was unsurprising to witness a wedding taking place in this luxuriant setting, while an affianced couple seated next to us looked to be having a slightly uncomfortable tasting with one of their in-laws.

Indeed, it was twice enquired of my guest and I whether we were also engaged to which we responded that we were in fact sister and brother; the humanist preacher who had approached us at our table, in line with her strictly non-judgmental principles, took this information in her stride, though the receptionist was a little embarrassed.

The restaurant at Stoke Place has a reasonably priced a-la-carte menu with most mains under twenty quid, but with a tasting menu in evidence for the non-concussive sum of fifty pounds I thought it would be rude not to. I closed my eyes and let it happen.

A playful amuse bouche arrived in the form of a large tortellini in tomato consommé. Inside the firm pasta lay more concentrated flavour, perhaps sun-dried tomatoes. Summer had arrived and the kitchen were happy to honour it.

Next came a terrine of rabbit and wild mushroom which my sister regarded as a little too gamey, though I enjoyed its unctuous texture and mild putrefaction and was happy to eat her leftovers.

Next arrived scallops, perhaps my favourite foodstuff. I regard their taste as akin to the trick of telling a child to listen to the sea by putting a shell to their ear; a flavour that creates an echo in the palate. They also possess a natural sweetness and joyously firm texture that, unusually for shellfish, requires no compromise with irritating exoskeleton or shell. Recently I discovered how fantastic they taste barbecued, coral and all, with just the slightest application of butter. Any addition to them I regard as mere tarding-up: natural beauty requires no make-up. Thus the accompanying foam was just that, a lot of air, but having negotiated the frippery, the scallops were all that I had in mind (though I would still plump for the white heat of coals over pan-frying).

A strawberry and champagne cocktail arrived to refresh the palate and remind us once again of the onset of summer time; tennis balls were bouncing in my head.

Including a fillet steak on a tasting menu might be considered predictable, and one can easily disparage its rather mild flavour by comparison with other cuts, but there is something peculiarly luxurious, dare I say softly aristocratic, about its buttery texture. My steak was supposed to arrive medium-rare but arrived medium, though it didn't really matter; this was well-sourced meat accompanied by delightful pearl barley in a cream sauce.

The sun had begun to shine more brightly and the outdoors were becoming irresistible so we decided to take our pudding on the veranda.

Here I draw a blank; all I recall is a plate full of chocolates of different hues, accompanied by more strawberries. The scene of the English country garden was complete, so I retired to a conveniently placed hammock, of generous proportions, to allow the different elements of the meal and my corporeal self to combine in holy matrimony.

NOTE: Stoke Place Restaurant Reservations, Tel: 01753 534 790.