

Stoke Place – A Gourmet Gorgefest 30 Mins From London

by TIMCHESTER

I went on a foodie retreat this weekend. Actually, it wasn't really a foodie retreat, I just felt like throwing those two cringeworthy words together. It wasn't a cookery course or a foraging foray or anything more than just taking a train to a hotel just for a gourmet meal but it was some kind of a food pilgrimage for want of a less wanky word, a trip to Stoke Place at Stoke Green for the night merely to try their menu (invited, it must be disclaimed). I say Stoke Green, it was really to all intents and purposes Slough. Slough postcode, Slough train station, just past Slough cemetery, a Slough MOT centre and several Slough booze bargain shops. Thankfully, though, (although I've never actually experienced Slough full-on) Stoke Place has put a handful of acres of wildlife and a huge brick wall between itself and that eternally derided place.

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And it's worth the 30 minute trek from Paddington. While you don't get the same feeling of blood pressure dropping and tension slinking away that you do, say, on the way to Devon, there's still big sighs of relief to be had all round as you wave goodbye to the capital and roll up Stoke Place's driveway. A 300 year old pile surrounded by Capability Brown grounds, Stoke Place wears a garland of stars and rosettes round its neck and for good reason. It's a sprawling, comfy old place that creaks, murmurs and gurgles with history: toilets growl back at you upon flush; plumbing belches; secret stairways creak obliquely. It's a place alive with sounds (not least the sirens we heard, presumably on the way to that booze shop and reminding you London is still nearby). There's a voice reading Winnie The Pooh stories in the gents while the dining room is alive with Sinatra, strung-out Marvin Gaye covers, and caper music for silent movies.

We ate in the Garden Room and we ate well. Head chef Craig Van der Meer offers an à la carte or a tasting menu, both of which display his imaginative approach to cooking writ large. A gin and tonic palate cleanser was a fluffy and astringent half mouthful topped with bitter, crunchy lime shards while something to do with yoghurt mousse, pumpkin crisp and granola was a sweet / savoury face-off that kept us distracted until the wine arrived. These little amuse geules set the tone for the rest of the meal – ambitious platefuls created by an ambitious chef with arguably one too many ingredients per plate. I suspect when Van der Meer goes out he looks in the mirror and adds one accessory.

But it turns out scallops work brilliantly with rhubarb, and tortellini should be packed with oyster mushrooms more often. Perhaps the latter needed a little less truffle sauce but what the hell. A plateful of beef fillet, tongue and cheek was mixed. The cheeks were so good I wanted to dance a merry jig round the table and the tongue a cheeky treat underneath but the fillet wasn't cooked as asked and the swede, [which Gourmet Chick has also noticed](#), had barely touched heat. It's obviously intentional to serve it near raw but it doesn't work. We had desserts in the room (they obliged, as all good places should), a fiesta of foams, sugary shards and teased creams that turned up pretty intact considering they've been created three floors and two wings of the hotel away.





If Betjeman's friendly bombs ever start hailing down on Slough, I'd like to think they'd spare Stoke Place.

Price Per Head: £20 for two courses. They offer a variety of gourmet escapes that include a room on the website. Gourmet escapes – I knew there was a better phrase than foodie retreat.

Clientele: A couple of weddings full of nouveau assez riche on our stay, but we didn't really notice them.

[Website](#)