

Tricks and treats

The menu at The Garden Room at Stoke Place is designed to tantalise and excite the palate. **Sandra Carter** puts her taste buds to the test and enjoys the fun and frippery of fine dining



I've been in family bathrooms where there's a pile of magazines to read in those quiet moments. But I've never had poems read out to me there.

At Stoke Place, you get nursery rhymes and whimsical verse coming from a loudspeaker to entertain you in the loos. The Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly was just the thing to put me in a relaxed mood before dinner.

We'd already spent a pleasant 20 minutes walking round the stunning lake in the grounds, where willows dip into the water, lilies dance en masse, and a couple of fishermen sit contented over their lines.

This area 'twixt Gerrards Cross and Slough, has long been a favourite haunt for the great and the good. Stoke Poges boasts no fewer than three historic mansions bearing its name – Stoke Park (golf and hotel), Stoke Court (offices), and Stoke Place, a hotel now in the hands of the Dhillon family.

Having found the right 17th-century mansion and explored Capability Brown's landscaping, we went in to discover a simply charming interior. Trendy chandeliers look down on original marble and flagstone flooring, smart patterned wallpaper creates a distinctive mood (botanical espaliers in The Garden Room, idyllic fishing scenes in a private dining room), whacky designer chairs brighten reception, while intricate moulding gives a classic ambience to the lounge.

Time for dinner in the cream-and-green Garden Room which overlooks the grounds and is flooded with light through tall windows. Stoke Place has been awarded two AA rosettes, the Good Food Guide 2011 calls it a "chi-chi boutique get-away", and now it is aiming for the higher echelons of fine dining. And my, doesn't it work hard at it. If you like your food plain and simple, you're likely to end up grumpy. But if you think a special night out is enhanced by food-as-fun tricks, this will suit you fine.

All the elements that you either love or hate are here: foams and crisps, artistic smears and designer blobs, with diverse crocks ranging from slate to trendy pottery to fine ceramic, and lots of different items in each dish. They must be slaving away in the kitchens.



First, a palate cleanser: verjuice sorbet with tomato consommé jelly and a tomato crisp, then an amuse-bouche of watercress mousse with quail egg and maple-cured bacon crumbs, with warm home-made bread. See what I mean about lots of elements? And we haven't yet started on the starters!

Lovely scallops come with Spice of Angels (a fennel-based pollen, if you please), glazed rhubarb, a fine fennel purée and sorrel foam. Poached wood pigeon looks and tastes fabulous: its violet potato might not taste of violets but the colour is ravishing alongside yellow beet purée, pickled raspberries, blobs of crimson purée and sheets of raspberry 'leather'.

Halibut with sweet potato and pak choi sounds safely plain. But wait, the fish is baked with a pistachio topping and dressed with Ras El Hanout spicy foam, while the potato comes three ways as a smear of purée, tiny cubes, and tasty square crisps. Roast duck breast veiled with lime foam comes with lime-flavoured mash, a cherry and port jus, spinach, and my only grump, baby turnips that were near-raw and bitter.

Can the kitchen do something playful with a cheeseboard? You bet. An excellent Welsh Perl Las blue cheese comes with a scoop of Reblochon cheese ice cream on a nest of red onion, with diced figs and a Manchego crisp: a rare treat for my partner.

For me, chocolate terrine is enlivened with tart lime curd and apricot sorbet, with dehydrated chocolate mousse to showcase yet another technique.

We must have tasted dozens of different elements in our meal, but every one is beautifully crafted with spot-on wizardry and, most important, all taste wonderful. It's like being let loose in a gourmet sweet shop and tasting a bit from every jar. We loved it.

Dinner at Stoke Place costs £30 for two courses, £40 for three, or there's a tasting menu at £55 plus service.

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