The Kings Arms Hotel

BY ROB MAGNUSON SMITH

As an unabashed American glutton, when I travel I require quality food in generous portions, an extensive wine and cocktail menu, and a big bed. In England, a country known for its modesty and martyrs, I don't always come home satisfied – but at The Kings Arms in Christchurch, I discovered friendly staff, a banquet of the highest order, and a luxuriously appointed room. By the time I left, I felt like Henry VIII.

I knew I was in the right place as soon as I arrived. The Georgian hotel is situated across the street from a tea garden and bowling green with manicured lawns, palm trees and bowlers in white uniforms. Past the stone ruins of the Priory (thus the name Christchurch), the Avon meanders to its confluence with the Stour under arched bridges draped in willows.

At the hotel lobby my companion and I were diverted to the Bar. It had been a warm day, so we ordered Hendrick's gin and tonics in chilled glasses with wedges of cucumber. Sufficiently refreshed, we headed upstairs to the room.

I must confess, I gasped. The enormous bed in its scalloped frame dominated the carpeted, high-ceilinged room. There was a plush sofa, glass coffee table, vanity table and chair and dimmed spotlights on runner boards. Our bathroom offered a deep tub and tastefully modern appointments. Shuttered double windows opened onto a balcony with views of the bowling green and Priory. On the coffee table a welcome basket greeted us – champagne on ice, an assortment of local cheeses and breads, homemade hummus, fresh scones, clotted cream and chocolates. (The basket came from Heartizans, a family-run deli just steps away.)

My companion thought we might need to work off our 'welcome snack,' so we decided to use the spa at The Kings Arms' sister hotel. After a short walk past sailboats and an assortment of inviting pubs, we arrived at the Christchurch Harbour Hotel and Spa. Armed with robes and slippers, we made our way to the pool. Facilities included sauna, steam and salt rooms. I spent most of the time soaking in the Jacuzzi and sweating off the champagne. After all that exercise I needed to eat.

"Don't worry, we'll visit one of the pubs later," my companion reassured me as we walked back for dinner. Little did I know we'd sit down for a full three hours.

Designed by Alex Aiken and Head Chef Ian Gibbs, The Kings Restaurant highlights fresh, locally sourced fish and New Forest game. I suggest you get there right away before word gets out and you won't be able to score a table. The clientele ranged from high society wives to local fishermen. This restaurant has an open, relaxed feel, with flickering candles in suspended glass boxes. Open windows offer light breezes coming off the Avon.

We started with smoked Dorset trout, served on a bed of horseradish potatoes with sprigs of fresh watercress. Then we tried asparagus and poached egg, topped with Parmesan shavings. We washed our starters down with a Sauvignon Blanc out of Marlborough, New Zealand, a delicious Nobilo with top notes of citrus and a satisfying resin bite. Our main arrived – a two-person mixed fish grill of sea bream, sole, Poole Bay mussels and clams, arrayed on a gigantic olive board garnished with roasted tomatoes and wedges of lemon and lime. I couldn't resist ordering a second olive board of meat for myself – slow-roasted shoulder of lamb, plus double rib-eye from the kitchen's Josper charcoal grill. The rib-eye came out pink and juicy, and ringed with plenty of fat. With my Sipsmith gin martini, I was in heaven.

"We should have dessert," my companion said. I looked at her like she was insane – before finding myself tucking into a phenomenal rhubarb and custard tart. The tart was shaped like a tower, with an elegant biscuit crust, rich custard cream, warm rhubarb, ginger ice cream and topped with an intricate latticework of caramelised sugar. I paired this masterpiece with a glass of port, cried mercy and limped upstairs to bed.

The Kings Arms in Christchurch is my new favourite destination, and I'll be heading back next time I want to be treated like royalty.

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