

LOCAL FOOD HEROES



Hotel on the Park

STEPHEN WHEELER, commercial manager at speciality food company Mise en Place, now part of Cheltenham-based Creed Foodservice, is responsible for sourcing the best food ingredients for top chefs across the country

BENJAMIN Bowen is well qualified to succeed in his ambition in making The Hotel on the Park Cheltenham's only five star Hotel.

He trained at the top-drawer Savoy and Claridges hotels in London, looking after visiting royalty and heads of state, before working as a 'business angel' for one of Britain's largest banks, turning around failing catering businesses.

Having then worked in America and the Caribbean, he bought The Hotel on the Park in 2007 after a long search for the right premises.

"Cheltenham is a perfect location for the hotel," Benjamin told me. "It's commutable to London, the Cotswolds are on the doorstep; it has great shopping, good schools and year-round high quality festivals not least the Gold Cup week."

He added: "There are excellent local suppliers – fresh meat from the Cotswolds is particularly good. Our head chef regularly visits producers and 75 per cent of our food now comes from the area – it makes an important difference to our customers."

Benjamin disputes the suggestion that luxury hotels have been immune to the recession.

"This is a popular myth," he replied. "We've had to work much harder for business, and keep a tight rein on costs, but we haven't compromised on the quality of our product. "Our strategy has paid off with increased levels of business from when I took over."

The Hotel on the Park has seen growth in the small luxury wedding market, and from overseas visitors, taking advantage of weaker sterling.

"We've invested in all parts of the hotel, and plan to build an in-house spa in 2011," says Benjamin.

"A Michelin star for our food is also on the wish-list,"

With 17 different fruit juices on offer at breakfast, and an open-top Morgan sports car available for guests to drive, the Hotel on the Park is certainly in a different league to most.

With his sights now firmly set on future expansion in the Cotswolds, what expert advice would Benjamin give to aspiring catering businesses as we begin to come out of recession?

"Be clear about your objectives and how to get there. Most importantly – don't deviate."

"The worst thing that a catering business can do, is to try to be something it's not."

Dinner made with loving care



The elegant dining room

COSSETED – that's the word that sums up how I felt after a long overdue repeat visit to Fosse Manor Hotel.

The feel-good factor starts from the moment you walk in – from the charm of the staff and the relaxing ambience to the culinary prowess.

It's like receiving a giant cuddle.

Yet it's rather sickening for a critic, whose mind is sharpened to expose the smallest fault, to find there weren't any. My pal Penny and I started our perfect soiree in the bar, laid-back but also with the right level of bustle and buzz.

We were seated in the split-level dining room's upper section which was plush and very brown.

If there was one tiny niggle, it was a bit too brown with an over-busy, corporate-style swirly carpet.

But the beams, alcoves, exposed

stonework and interesting art soon distracted us.

Penny, who arrived at her choice of menu by a long process of elimination, found she couldn't rule out two starters – so we shared.

Our lime scented crab and filo parcel with lemon and lime dressing was sublime.

Laced with tiny shrimps and spring onions, it had a fab Oriental zing.

The airiest goats cheese souffle, garlic and parmesan cream blew us away but packed a punch with a very delicate sauce.

Oohs and aahs kept coming from our table over the artful presentation of every dish.

Mains lived up to expectations too.

Penny plumped for roast tenderloin of pork, champ potato, buttered carrots, black pudding and apple sauce.

She loved the very tender meat, wrapped in uplifting sage and pancetta, exquisite

baby carrots and the perfectly cooked black pudding but hankered for a bit more sauce.

I went for the veggie option, beetroot and Cotswold blue cheese polenta, shallot tart and fondant potato.

Often bland, polenta needs a strong taste to lift it and I was spoilt for choice with the explosion of strong accompaniments.

The elimination process loomed with dessert, but this time it was a no-brainer as the recommendation hit the spot.

A trio of toffee, parfait, brulee, sticky pudding and salted peanut ice-cream couldn't be resisted.

It was cracking, and the peanut icecream almost seemed an overkill when the rest was so good.

We adjourned to the snuggest lounge and nestled by the wood burner.

It was easy to forget you were in a hotel and I'll be back when I need some more TLC.

Caroline Fisher

Mise en Place
THE SPECIALITY FOOD COMPANY