

Now that's what I call lunch...



Mike Cowley finds foodie heaven at the Alderley Restaurant

In the vast desert of culinary mediocrity in which discerning food lovers too often find themselves today, there is still at least one oasis of excellence and good taste (in both senses of the phrase) to be found in Cheshire. The Alderley Restaurant at Alderley Edge Hotel stand apart as a bastion of fine dining. Here is one establishment that has not succumbed to a menu where average food blends with above average prices, it's not the sort of place where having paid up a wallet squeezing bill you wish you'd stayed at home.

My three course lunch plus coffee and petit fours there was not only a culinary treat but at £19.95 top value for money when just "down the hill" there are a number of inferior eateries charging more than that for one course.

The Alderley Restaurant is sadly one of a dying breed, one where head chef Chris Holland and his team of 10 prepare everything themselves – from baking the bread rolls to the ingredients for the petit fours. Should the ping of a microwave be ever heard in there it would cause more shock and consternation among the staff than a fire alarm.

My starter was salmon and lobster sausage (yes a real "home made" banger with the flavours of the ingredients married together), dill mousse, sauté of spinach and caviar Hollandaise.

Without wishing to sound too much like Michael Winner, if this first course had been a woman, I would have gone down on one knee and proposed to it.

My main was as adventurous as you would find at the Fat Duck at Bray. Home smoked ox cheek "sous vide", truffle potato espuma, shallot and red wine reduction. The interesting bit is the "sous-vide", a method of cooking devised by Heston Blumenthal, with the Alderley being the only restaurant in Cheshire to adopt it.

It takes the principle of "boil in the bag" – God of gastronomy please forgive me for using this comparison – and refines it to gourmet excellence. My ox cheek had been placed in a "bag" along with all the necessary herbs and spices and then kept in a bain marie style unit at exactly 57 degrees for three days. Three days. Eat your heart out Ronald McDonald.

The end result is incomparable in that the

meat has been effectively cosseted in a warm bath, just hot enough to cook it incredibly slowly, not hot enough to let the flesh go tense.

For pud, it was pliable chocolate granache, flavours of mandarin and white chocolate power. And the granache had taken two days to prepare.

Here then is the antithesis to fast food, something to spend time on, real enjoyment.

Even the petit fours had been a labour of love. Bite into the interesting apple "jelly" and your mouth explodes –literally.

That's because those clever devils in the kitchen have included crackling crystals which react in contact with moisture.

Washed down with a glass of fine, Bordeaux, that's what I call lunch. Don't go anywhere else . . .



Everything - but everything - on the lunch menu is made in the Alderley Restaurant kitchen - top, the warm bread rolls are wrapped for presentation; the salmon and lobster sausage mix is prepared (above)



From left to right - the ox cheek is removed from the sous-vide bag; the potato espuma is piped; the main course is presented



From left to right - the granache mix is prepared; the granache is sliced; the pud in all its glory; and finally the petit fours complete with "crackling crystals"