

**CHRIS GRAY**

enjoys eating out in the Cotswolds, but finds he can't go clubbing during a stay at The Sheep

**T**he delightful Cotswold market town of Stow-on-the-Wold is ideally placed for a potter from Oxford, with gorgeous scenery en route, whether travelling via Burford or Chipping Norton.

Its popularity with the tourist trade – those antique shops! – guarantees a sufficient supply of establishments wherein visitors may feed, drink and lay their heads.

To their number has recently been added the Sheep on Sheep Street, an excellent managed house from Brakspear which has been packed to the rafters since opening in July.

Parts of the Sheep date from the 17th century, with other buildings added over the years. And if readers who know Stow are wondering why they haven't heard of it, that's because it was previously called the Grapevine.

Brakspear bought the place at the beginning of the year and began a tasteful renovation to create 22 bedrooms, a restaurant and bar seating 100, and a plant-filled courtyard garden, built around a featured fireplace.

Arriving on our midweek visit, we found customers thronging the garden on a less than balmy evening and tables inside already steadily filling with diners.

Ours was not an anonymous appraisal, but arose from an invitation that also included an overnight stay. A mini holiday, then? Yes please! None could fail to be impressed by the accommodation, with its relaxing décor in muted tones of blue and grey. Feather & Black beds with crisp white linen helped ensure a comfortable night's sleep.

With my fading eyesight I could have done with more in the way of illumination. Do hotel designers never consider people who read?

Down in the bar we found an eager team ready with service. Our drinks were poured by a chap, Liam, of such bijou proportions that I thought he could have been a jockey. Turned out this is exactly what he was in his life away from the Sheep. Obligated to tip the scales at no more than nine stone, he is not permitted



The stylish dining area of the Sheep on Sheep Street

# 'Follow the flock'

indulgence in the beverages he dispenses with such ease.

Our half-hour sojourn at the bar was an enjoyable necessity since all tables in the dining area at this comparatively early hour (8.15pm) were full.

Folk visiting Stow seem to like to be at the trough early and then sharpish to bed. When Rosemarie and I ventured out for a stroll at 10.30pm, the streets were deserted.

Seated shortly before 9pm, we

**Folk who visit Stow like to be at the trough early and then sharp to bed**

were ready to explore the delights of chef Matthew Houghton's menu, with starters ranging through soy and sesame duck salad, bruschetta with slow-roasted tomatoes and Thai fishcakes, and main courses as varied as peri-peri chicken fillet, Malaysian curry of sweet potato and aubergine, grilled haloumi burger and – but of course! – Cotswold lamb leg steak.

There is also a range of nine speciality pizzas, of generous (10inch) dimension cooked in the wood-fired oven at one end of the bar. Fancying one as a starter, I asked if a mini edition could be arranged.

Indeed it could, and I found myself with a junior version of the Sheep Street special which features a topping of spiced lamb, ewe's milk cheese (Berkswell), mint and red onion jam, and pomegranate.

Though I could have done without the pesky seeds of the pomegranate – the dish was delicious, the crispy dough especially so.

Rosemarie was all praise, too, for her gambas pil pil (shelled prawns baked with garlic, chilli and olive oil), though she thought the accompanying bloody mary mayonnaise a tad superfluous.

Her 7oz Wagyu burger that followed was much enjoyed, though she would have preferred it less well



Oven-baked plaice with garlic prawns

done. It came in a brioche bun with fries, Swiss cheese, bacon jam, and beer battered onion ring.

I chose the oven-baked plaice which looked rather pallid (cooked in a sealed dish, I suppose) but tasted fine. It came with garlic prawns, grilled tenderstem and watercress.

To finish, I had a slice of more sheep-sourced cheese (Spanish manchego) with salted almonds and Cotswold honey. Rosemarie tried 'oven fried' plums (a new one on me) with granola, whipped vanilla yoghurt and Cotswold honey.

"Now for the clubs!" I joked. Not in Stow, I fear.

**THE PARTICULARS:**

The Sheep on Sheep Street, Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire, GL54 1AG, tel. 01451 830344, thesheepstow.co.uk Food served daily noon to 9.30pm (10pm Friday and Saturday) Parking . . . rear car park accessed from Back Walls The people . . . general manager Ben Fox and head chef Matthew Houghton Do try . . . gambas pil pil with bloody mary mayonnaise (£6), Sheep Street pizza (£8.50), oven baked plaice (£17.50), Wagyu burger (£15.50), manchego cheese with salted almonds (£7), oven-fried plums with granola (£7)



The Sheep on Sheep Street partly dates from the 17th century