

DENISE BARKLEY reviews two very different eateries, one in the city and the other in the picturesque Cotswolds

Idyllic inn, idyllic town. . .

I found myself in the Cotswolds recently when I went to Burford to dine at one of this west Oxfordshire tourist town's most picturesque of establishments, The Lamb Inn.

Everyone knows that Burford is pretty, but this was heartily endorsed earlier this year when the respected American business magazine *Forbes* named the leafy Cotswold town as the sixth most idyllic place to live in Europe.

Idyllic is certainly a word that comes to mind when you set eyes on The Lamb, created from a row of weavers' cottages, dating back to 1420, in Sheep Street — where the hotel's owners have another of their establishments, the equally attractive Bay Tree Hotel. But I had no time to reflect on the beauty of The Lamb or Burford as, true to form this summer, when we arrived for dinner, it was raining.

There seem to be several entrance doors into the hotel, and we ended up clattering rather noisily on the flagstone floor into one of the lounges.

Because the hotel has been created from a row of cottages, you can weave pleasantly from the charming glass panel-encased bar into a number of different lounges, all comfortably furnished with lots of antiques, big paintings and flower arrangements. Very traditional, very Cotswold. Upstairs, I was told, there are 17 individually-styled bedrooms.

Our efficient waiter soon had us equipped with fortifying aperitifs and, with nuts and olives to nibble, we made the all-important menu decisions and were soon shown through to the restaurant.

I haven't been to The Lamb in six years (it was my daughter's chosen destination for a family meal on her 18th birthday). The restaurant is lovely — furnished in dark wood with red decor, but still very light and airy. If you are seated near the windows you can enjoy a view of the pretty courtyard.

We kicked off with an amuse bouche of a small crispy duck spring roll with thinly sliced beetroot, prettily arranged on a slate. On to starters, and my husband didn't have to make any decision — he cannot resist scallops. They arrived, nicely seared and prettily presented with some langoustines (these lovely sweet prawns seem to be having something of a renaissance of late), drizzled with vanilla sauce.

My ballotine of salmon featured some very rare salmon (too rare for my liking) rolled with herbs, accompanied by local crayfish and a blob of creme fraiche to cut through the richness.

Main course options included pan-fried salmon with oyster beignet and ginger and lemon grass broth, or roast pork fillet with confit pork belly tarte tatin, but, never being able to resist duck, I opted for the roast breast accompanied by a little duck and foie

gras 'faggot'. Yummy, and so were the braised cabbage, fondant potato and sweet and sour mushrooms which all worked excellently with it.

This was a real fine dining experience, and my husband was happy with his main course, a posh take on steak and chips which featured sliced rump of beef with a tomato stew, rosti potato, shallot puree and fried mushrooms. The beautifully pink beef turned out to be a tiny bit on the chewy side.

Puddings — I was a bit worried that the pistachio cake might be heavy, but it wasn't at all. It was light and nutty and came with a small mound of lemon pannacotta. I would have liked some sauce or fruit puree to moisten it a bit more, though. My husband's pear tarte tatin was fab, but the blue cheese ice cream was a killer. Very strong indeed!

We ended the evening with coffee taken in the genteel lounge. If you fancy a little Cotswold pampering, The Lamb Inn is a very pleasant choice.



■ The Lamb Inn, Sheep Street, Burford OX18 4LR
tel: 01993 823 155
www.cotswolds-inns-hotels.co.uk



A sunny shot of The Lamb At Burford and, left, the restaurant

Stick your neck out for Giraffe!

I've seen the Giraffe restaurant on Oxford's 'restaurant mile' — George Street — but, because of the name, I surmised it was one of those fast-food places with an emphasis on children.

How wrong could I be. Giraffe is family-friendly and serves the food up quickly, but meals are fresh, flavoursome and fun, the restaurant has a wonderfully relaxed ambience with smiley helpful staff, and I really enjoyed the whole experience and will definitely be going back.

So, apart from a misleading name (my dining companion Dee agreed that Giraffe definitely had a juvenile emphasis), Giraffe is something a bit different among the endless pasta and pizza palaces.

It serves a whole range of international food from Mexican burritos and enchiladas to American burgers, Chinese stir-fries and Greek mezze. And it is all ultra-fresh. If you are watching the calories, you can do so without guilt here with a Sunshine Powerfood Salad packed with all sorts of goodies like spicy roasted pumpkin, spinach, edamame beans, seeds and cashew nuts. It is also good to see vegetarians so well catered for — anyone for baked tortilla lasagne with ricotta and artichoke, or veggie and oregano feta salad?

As has been far too often the case this summer,



Veggie lasagne

the rain was positively chucking it down when we arrived around 6pm.

Manager Richard Bradshaw, who has recently returned to live in the UK after 20 years in South Africa, was probably having more trouble with the weather than us, but he gave us a warm welcome and we were soon seated, armed with glasses of white wine and perusing the menu, which proclaimed that Giraffe was 'about exploring the wonderful foods from all around the globe'.

First up for me was a grilled taco piled with pieces of tender chargrilled chicken, juicy mango, radish, cucumber and a touch of red chilli and

coriander. I couldn't see any sign of the advertised 'green tomato salsa', but no matter, it made a fresh and tasty start to the meal.

Dee had Japanese tiger prawns — four large butterflied ones coated in breadcrumbs and fried, served with sweet chilli dip.

The menu is quite long, and interesting, so deciding on a main course was difficult. In the end I went for the hot Thai duck stir-fry, which was packed with shredded duck and crisp veggies including bok choy, red peppers and mushrooms, and noodles. I would have liked a little more chilli heat, but it tasted delicious.

On the other side of the table, Dee approved of her low fat option — grilled Cajun spiced chicken burger in a sizeable bun with salsa and roasted red pepper. It was accompanied by a side salad.

We shared dessert — Rocky Road ice cream sundae which featured pieces of gooey chocolate brownie, ice cream and little marshmallows. I finished with coffee and noticed that committed tea-drinkers might like the choice available here, including Giraffe's own Moroccan mint tea.

Giraffe is a feelgood place, serving feelgood food all day — and, in my book, a real find.

■ Giraffe, 71 George Street, Oxford OX1 2BQ
tel: 01865 201030, www.giraffe.net

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