

The Wheatsheaf Inn, Northleach

23 Nov 2012 by Richard Hemming

We heard it before we saw it, and our hearts jumped into our mouths. A jarring, horrible, high-frequency clamour, piercing enough to rattle the very fillings of your molars. My wife and I were entering a boutique village pub hotel for a night of quiet escapism. She is the deputy head of a primary school, and it was the autumn half-term holiday.

Greeting us was the unmistakable, stomach-churning screaming of a children's party.

Inside, grown-ups stood pinned against the walls, dazed and hopeless as the colour and noise blurred uncontrollably around their knees. Some were shouting, desperately. Others had long since given up. And then you noticed. The horrible deformities on their little faces. Their blood-streaked hair. Their discoloured complexions. The raw sores, the gross growths. The pointy hats.

For this was a Halloween party for the local village children, and all were in fancy dress. We turned on our heels and walked promptly back out into the cold.

Luckily for us, the pretty Cotswolds village of Northleach is unusually vinously blessed. In the small cluster of shops that sit obediently at the foot of the oversized parish church there is a notably well-endowed wine bar. It is peculiar enough to find not just Grüner Veltliner but also St Laurent being poured by the glass – but in a village of only 2,000 souls? What country, friends, is this?

It transpires that the Ox House Wine Company is the offspring of Mark Savage MW, and houses a small, independent merchant and wholesaling business. The wine bar thus boasts a fine collection of interesting drinks, and a similarly fine collection of vintage wine titles, as pictured. We settled in by the fire and enjoyed a few glasses of Austria's native offerings to grapedom, passing the time by playing cribbage while eavesdropping on the locals drinking at the bar.

By the time we returned to The Wheatsheaf Inn an hour or so later to freshen up before our dinner reservation, you'd never guess the earlier hell that had passed. All was quiet on the Wheatsheaf front. Flaming logs crackled quietly in the grate, smart young staff bustled swiftly and purposefully, and the warm air was rich with the scent of fire, food and tipsy happiness. We stole upstairs to our small but comfortable room, and readied ourselves for the main event.

Dinner. My second favourite word, after lunch. It began with a pre-prandial tippie, as all the best ones do. I had a pint of something local and Kathryn had a flute of their champagne by the glass, the excellent **Delamotte NV**. Well selected, well kept and well served, this was as sure a sign as any that good things were in store.

And so it proved. The menu was not the most adventurous, but that always confers the advantage that there are things you actually want to eat. The execution was impeccable: a plate of wild boar prosciutto was melting and flavoursome, and the English black truffle risotto was nicely stinky and pleasingly al dente. Then came steak of good provenance and skilful skilleting accompanied by hot, indulgent Savoyard potatoes. Yes, yes, yes, all delicious. Now let's get to the wine.

We were attended by the sommelier, Angela, a German girl who has been in the Cotswolds for three years. She was good. How good? I went there determined to have an Australian Cabernet Sauvignon and she sold me a Moroccan Syrah, that's how good. It was **Dom de la Zounina, Epicuria Syrah 2005** and it did just the trick, with seven years of bottle age and a fine meaty, earthiness to show for it. I only wish it hadn't been 14.5% alcohol, a thought that came to me most forcefully the following morning.

In retrospect, maybe we shouldn't have then indulged in a glass of dessert wine to finish, but there were so many to choose from it seemed an opportunity too good to pass up. Kath had a sauternes (I don't know which, but by now I trusted them to only sell very good ones), while I was switched by Angela from my beloved Chenin Blanc onto - wait for it - a late harvest, fortified Cabernet Sauvignon from **Paso Robles** called **Justin Obtuse**. And that was excellent too.

Other highlights from the wine list include eight sherries by the glass, trophy Burgundies from names such as Sauzet, Dujac and DRC, compact but well-selected Austrians, Germans and Americans ... the list, quite literally, goes on.

The image of the perfect country pub in the most idyllic location is strongly formed. Everyone can picture it. To satisfy such vivid preconceptions can't be easy: the staff, the food, the accommodation, the décor, the drinks, the annual children's Halloween party ... and to do it with such confidence and accomplishment too – it's remarkable. The résumé of the staff explains much, with accumulated experience from Langans, The Glass House, Mirabelle, The Square, Chez Bruce and elsewhere, and it shows.

[The Wheatsheaf Inn](#) has already had plenty of glowing reviews. They are thoroughly deserved, as far as I can tell, and I am pleased to be able to add to their number. For wine lovers, it especially calls for a visit (just read [their wine list](#) if you don't believe me!)

Just maybe avoid early evening on Halloween.

Dinner and drinks for two was £144, and the room was £130.

