

Annie Savill's Birthday Treat A Day to Remember



It is a long time since a lady asked me out on a date but, thanks to the generosity of her friends in the Wychwoods, Annie invited me on what was certainly the most memorable lunch I have ever had. The last time I was asked out by a girl was in the days when scampi in a basket was the ultimate in sophisticated eating, so no wonder lunch at The Manoir aux Quat' Saisons was a revelation!

Champagne on the Terrace

Arriving at the Manoir we were escorted out to the terrace overlooking the lawns where we were served with champagne and nibbles. When I say 'nibbles' I mean the most delicious, beautifully presented platter of amuses-bouche, each one a tiny creation of colour and taste. At this point, I think Annie and I stopped trying to pretend that we were really used to this kind of treatment and became like excited children, exclaiming over everything and taking photos of the place, ourselves – even the nibbles.

There followed a wonderful five course lunch in the conservatory section of the dining room. Every dish was remarkable for the extraordinary delicacy of ingredients and the presentation. The lunch started with a small round of ricotta cheese served with cut olives and basil. There followed a grilled fillet of Cornish

Mackerel, served with compressed apple, honey, ginger and lime. Then appeared a 'soft fried hen's egg, with watercress, Jabugo ham and hazelnuts' and this was followed by the main course, slices of rare roast rump of lamb with an unusual beetroot gratin and garden vegetables. Before the dessert we were offered a taster of Goats cheese from Somerset with peach, cumin and celery.

Just Desserts

The dessert, as delicious as the earlier courses, was a revelation. Described as 'Manjari chocolate and raspberry crumble', it was to die for. The delicate dark chocolate was fashioned into a little closed nest in which raspberries had been hidden - and with tiny pieces of gold leaf on top! Annie's dessert was served with a 'Happy Birthday' card on the dish and a single candle festively lit on a little mound of raspberry sorbet. I thought the card was probably edible but Annie refused to test my theory.



Before starting the meal, a suave Sommelier appeared discreetly at the table with a wine list of terrifying complexity. But we (or rather I) did not pretend to any particular familiarity with wines costing more by the glass than I am used to paying for a bottle of house red. So, after serious consultation with, and

recommendations by our friendly expert, we chose a chilled French Rousillon wine, Le Roc des Anges 2010. It was served in the biggest wine glasses we had ever seen. The Dining Room staff, many of them young French men and women who were working at the Manoir, told us that they came to gain experience and improve their English. All were impeccably mannered, highly professional and obviously revelling in their jobs.

“En’s Hegg and Am”

Our particular waitress, from Bordeaux and only at the Manoir since July, described each dish in the greatest detail as she served us. Only once did she falter a little with her English. She stumbled over the pronunciation of “soft fried hen’s egg.” We would be having, she said, a “soft fri-éd en’s hegg”. She didn’t know how exactly to pronounce “Jabugo Ham” either, but Annie and I were no help there because neither of us had ever heard of it! Coffee and tea were served in the garden



under huge umbrellas. A special ten-page Tea Menu listed a range of white, black, green and matured teas from China, India, Vietnam and other exotic locations. We were tempted to try a Thai variety “grown on estates formerly used for opium growing,” but we did not want to risk returning to Shipton in an Oriental Trance, so we rather timidly opted for coffee. With the coffee came another

exquisite selection of ‘petit fours’. By this point we were running out of superlatives. It seems somehow expected that one sees ‘celebrities’ in a place like the Manoir. We did spot Gyles Brandreth having a cup of tea on the lawn but, since he was discreet enough not to approach Annie for her autograph, she wisely did not bother him either.

The Most Pleasurable Experience

If I have given the impression that the whole experience was a trifle overwhelming, I do not mean to: everyone at the Manoir was as friendly and helpful as possible. It was the most pleasurable, un-intimidating and fascinating experience one can imagine.



Our wonderful day finished with a stroll round the gardens, especially the vegetable and herb beds from which most of the food served is sourced. The gardens, all beautifully tended, were laid out in immaculate rows with pieces of statuary from Raymond Blanc’s own collection of modern art dotted amongst them. For a man who started as a junior waiter in Oxford, you can only admire what he has been able to achieve at the Manoir. Because of the generosity of her friends, I know that Annie had a really wonderful day at the Manoir. As for me, I was even more fortunate to be asked to be her guest. Merci Beaucoup Citoyens!

Christopher Lethbridge