

# Summer treats *that tantalise your taste buds...*

*'I am confident to recommend Olivier's at the Inn at Woburn for a thoroughly enjoyable dining experience'*

*Words and Photography by Bob Bluffield*

I am frequently asked to recommend places to eat where friends can go to experience a combination of good food, fine ambience and service that excels without getting in your face.

It always puts me on the spot because at times a restaurant I may once have recommended falls short and fails to deliver on one or more of the key criteria. This can happen for a variety of reasons and although you may be prepared to accept a reduction in standards on a single occasion, being let down on a subsequent visit would soon take away my credibility as a source of recommendation.

Now there are a few establishments where come hell or high water I am pretty certain that standards will be maintained even at times when the chef might fall ill or there is a minor crisis in the kitchen. Good restaurants will always overcome this; usually because they are managed well and they have 'strength in squad' that enables somebody to take over should the main player be unavoidably absent.

One such place is Olivier's, an enclave of well defined fine eating located in an equally fine hotel; the Inn at Woburn. I like the atmosphere, the food is always a delight and it is a place where I feel comfortably relaxed. During the time when the

hostelry was known as the Bedford Arms it fell flat in the culinary department and it was best avoided but gladly those days are far in the past. In recent years the hotel has been completely transformed after Woburn Estates returned it to family control and installed Richard Carr as a gentle yet stylish general manager. The name of the hotel was also changed and the Inn at Woburn emerged to bury the memories of the older establishment.

Ridding the hotel of the ghosts of the past was thankfully not too difficult due mostly to Richard's strong leadership and his skills at building a great team around him. He leads by example and his charm extends to every quarter of the Inn but above all to the kitchen that has emerged to champion the case for fine dining. It also speaks volumes for a place when, as a guest, you are greeted by familiar faces more especially as the hotel industry is not renowned for staff loyalty. The management team that includes executive chef Olivier Bertho has been together for some considerable time and it shows in the way that the establishment functions overall as a well oiled machine without losing any of the personal touch. Personally, I hate change, especially in a place where I like to go to eat and relax. For this reason the Inn at Woburn is always a pleasure to visit and I have every confidence in recommending it.

Chef, Olivier gives his signature to the restaurant, and is given a free hand to develop his own style of cuisine that is creative, fresh and very enjoyable. The air of calm permeates through to the kitchen; a place that traditionally can be a hotbed of tantrums. But there is none of this here. Olivier is a quiet, unassuming Frenchman with a deep passion for his food that



inspires his brigade of six. He is also exceptionally modest, preferring to remain in the background of his kitchen rather than indulging, like some chefs, in customer admiration. The French influence continues in the form of David Bouchet who manages the restaurant with a superb level of calm efficiency that he delegates to his front line waiting staff.

Unless you are familiar with the place, the Inn at Woburn, by name alone, can create a slightly misleading image by conjuring in the mind a small, country hostelry with limited facilities. This is far from the case and while the Inn does not boast a leisure centre or swimming pool it does offer conference facilities and is sufficiently versatile to cater for business visitors, wedding parties and individuals wishing to enjoy first class hospitality while enjoying some of the locality's amenities. The premises are very comfortably furnished throughout and the ambience is seductively welcoming. Step into the impressive foyer with its baby grand piano and witness the soft furnishings set into cosy corners among the rich décor and you'll realise that the name of the Inn is a tad understated. Move in to the restaurant and you may be surprised that it has none of the pomposity of some hotel dining rooms and there is certainly no need to dress formally. Here the furnishings and décor are bright and light and the walls are adorned with newspaper cuttings and cartoons relating to the Dukes of Bedford. Although there are no signs of tardiness, the restaurant is due for a refurbishment in the near future if only to maintain its fresh appeal.

Olivier's is situated in two small well-appointed adjacent rooms that serve to provide a greater level of intimacy. There are no stiff tablecloths and this gives it a feel more akin to a bistro although the chairs are more French period in design. I love the dining room because it is a place where you can feel at ease and completely comfortable and know that the staff will do their utmost to cater for your whims.

I couldn't wait to savour the new menu that Olivier has introduced for the summer. It is not extensive, nor needs to be; nine starters; the same number of main courses and seven desserts plus a hearty cheese board. I selected smoked eel with horseradish cream on a potato pancake as my starter (£6.55) that was served with a julienne of beetroot, frisée and crispy pancetta; a light and thoroughly tasty way to start my dinner. My wife opted for the open ravioli with grilled asparagus, a vegetarian dish that is decorated with saffron Hollandaise and glazed with Parmesan (£5.25). For main course I had pan-fried free range chicken breast flavoured with tarragon that is served with oyster mushroom, whole peas, sweet potatoes and a red wine reduction (£13.95). The chicken was moist, fully succulent and the dish oozed flavour. As an extra I added some lightly sautéed potatoes (£3.00). My wife chose succulent loin of Woburn venison, slightly rare, with a celeriac and potato rösti (£16.75) that came with pack choy, honey roasted parsnips and a sage and Madeira sauce. Despite trying to watch my waistline the Assiette au chocolate was irresistible (£6.95). This is a superb combination of a warm chocolate and orange fondant,



*Carpaccio of fresh tuna served with a rocket and tomato salsa (a starter)*



*Loin of line-caught cod wrapped in Brickhill ham and spaghetti potato with ribbons of courgette, carrots and a fresh herb dressing.*



*Lemongrass infused red peach consommé. A light crisp elegant chilled fresh fruit soup served with filo sticks*

white chocolate and raspberry baked American cheesecake and iced mint, chocolate chip parfait. What can I say? My wife enjoyed the generous selection of British and continental cheeses, with grapes, celery, gooseberry chutney and biscuits to finish (£6.75). Vegetarians have been considered with choices of two starters and three main courses on the menu.

The wine list, is balanced, wide-ranging and contains specifically selected wines across a broad spectrum that escape from the 'branded' names associated with many restaurants. It was interesting to see that an English wine, Combe Hay (£16.95), from a small vineyard in Bath had been added and is the Inn's white wine of the month. Derived from the Huxelrebe and Mullar Thurgau grapes that flourish in England, this is a smooth wine with less acidity than many English wines. It is a refreshing summer wine, excellent for al fresco dining but sadly expensive at £16.95. We opted for a fairly young (2006) Livor Organic Rioja that was good value but lacking the depth of a Crianza. Finally, a relaxing coffee in the lounge with home made petit fours completed a wonderfully indulging evening that left me feeling satisfyingly comfortable without the 'heaviness' from over-eating.

**Olivier's at the inn at Woburn**

**George Street, Woburn MK17 9PX**

**Telephone: 01525 290441**

**Open: 7.00am to 10.00pm for breakfast, morning coffee or three-course meal.**

