

Pelham House

Emma Chaplin enjoys an outstanding meal in an under-new-management restaurant



Photographs: Kallie Moorren



You can tell a lot about a place by how they handle giving you tap water to drink. If restaurants are mean-spirited or tardy with it, my hackles rise immediately. It was striking, therefore, during a recent visit to the Pelham House restaurant, now under new management, to be brought a large jug of it without being asked. We had wandered down St Andrew's Lane to the hotel early on a wild and windy Sunday evening, and instead of putting us in an empty restaurant (actually set up for breakfast), we had been seated next to the window in the attractive Jacobean panelled room at the back of the hotel. Intermittent gusts were causing stray foliage to scrape at the glass, giving the room, with its strange, deep brown wooden carvings, a bit of an Agatha Christie vibe. Although dark outside, we could see the lights of Newhaven shimmering in the distance. I imagine it must be lovely, on warmer, lighter evenings, to eat on the terrace, looking down over the garden and across to the Downs.

The two chaps now in charge of the Pelham House kitchens are Peter Wynn and Simon Raynor. Their culinary pedigree is impressive, Simon having worked at Gidleigh Park and under Giorgio Locatelli, and Peter having been head chef at Brighton's Terre à Terre.

The others eating seemed to be hotel guests, and it struck me that it can be a tough feat to pull off, meeting the needs of residents as well as the general public, but the mix felt comfortable. As we looked over the menu, the genial waiter brought over a plate of homemade Parmesan bread and a bowl of particularly good quality olives. A glance down the menu, which changes daily, revealed a selection of dishes that sounded appealing. With the Terre à Terre connection, it came as no surprise to see a number of good vegetarian options. Starters ranged from £5-£8. We had a slight debate as to who was going to have the pan-seared scallops,

but by a successful distraction technique of pointing out how good the duck presse terrine with spiced winter berries and stoneground sourdough sounded, I got to order them. Since I was having fish for my main course too, and my companion wanted lamb, we chose wine by the glass. Both French, Bellafontaine at £4.50, mine Sauvignon Blanc, his Merlot. Then the starters arrived and a smile, akin to the Cheshire cat encountering a tub of clotted cream, spread across my face. Three fat, tender, juicy, perfectly cooked and seasoned scallops laid across a truffle split pea puree, served with a baby Gem and toasted hazelnut salad. It was skilfully executed; the scallops utterly delicious. Without a moment's hesitation I'd have assaulted with my fork anyone trying to pinch one. But reluctantly, I did hand one over, in exchange for some tasty duck. We ordered more glasses of wine as our main courses were brought in. Mine was sea bass fillet with a leek, potato and saffron broth at £12. It came with a disc of dill buttered crayfish, which was the only thing I was unsure about. I liked the crayfish, but wasn't sure about the butter. My companion had some mighty fine lamb served with aged balsamic jus at £13. And because we are greedy, we had also ordered a side dish of sea salt skinny fries at £4, which mopped up the juices nicely. The flavours of the puy lentil base with the lamb were particularly complex and well put together. The pretty dark orange of the roasted squash contrasted nicely with the deep green of some perfectly cooked winter cabbage. After our plates were removed, we wavered over pudding, and decided to share a butterscotch parkin pudding at £6. It came with a prune and Armagnac compote and cream, and we shared a glass of Sauternes with it at £4.50. Overall, an outstandingly good meal. **Open daily from 12pm (lunch) and 6.30pm (dinner) 01273 488600**