

# THE GREAT OUTDOORS

**Lesley Rawlinson** relaxes in the sun with an al fresco dining experience at Seckford Hall

I'm a lover of the outdoors. The office window is generally open, I walk every day and if the weather is dry I'll generally opt for an outside seat when there's a choice. However this love of fresh air so often means that when we'd prefer to be outside we end up taking the more casual options on offer; pretty pub gardens, fish and chips on the beach and the like. Imagine my joy, therefore, when I discovered the opportunity to dine 'al fresco' at one of Suffolk's best known historic hotels, Seckford Hall.

The Hall itself is a rather magnificent building. It dates from 1530 and the Tudor architecture has been recently complemented by an updated interior refurbishment that's been underway over the past 12 months. While it's always had a strong following Seckford Hall had been previously saddled with a rather formal image and it's refreshing now to see a wide range of age groups enjoying the various aspects of the hotel's restaurants, bars and leisure facilities.

We planned a lunch time visit and pre-booked to enjoy the 1530 Dining Room menu but at one of the outside tables. There's a bar menu too, or indeed afternoon tea, both of which can be enjoyed outside. The three sided courtyard at the rear of the main building was basking in full sun so I was pleased to see well positioned parasols to offer plenty shade where needed. The historic red brick, wisteria clad walls created a perfectly sheltered spot for our table and gave us stunning views across beyond.





It's not surprising that so many brides are wooed by the vision of having their wedding photographs taken beside the lake, it really is an unrivalled and serene backdrop.

While we pondered the view and settled at our white-clothed table, Restaurant Manager Pawel Boguslawski took our drinks order and explained the specials for the day – pea and pancetta soup with the 'cut of the day' a 28 day-aged steak. Tempting indeed the thick soup had some succulent peas intact alongside the small pieces of pancetta – artistically served in a small but deep bowl which means that, with a smaller surface area, the soup retains its heat well. My fellow diner had her eye on the home cured salmon with lemongrass, ginger and coriander to start, served with a fennel salad and lime crème fraiche dressing. When the dish arrived the aroma from the plate was remarkable and the many layers of flavour punched their way through while not overpowering the salmon. I decided to go for the smoked applewood Cheddar and caramelised shallot tart as my starter. Quiche-like in appearance the fine layer of shallot made the perfect bedfellow for the lightly whipped cheese layer that would have made a delicious light lunch in itself. Pawel recommended a Sauvignon Blanc which accompanied our choices very well indeed.

On to the main course and my friend is a great lover of steak, so much so that she now resists ordering it at times for fear of not meeting her expectations. Having read the description though; 28 day-aged Sirloin steak with Dauphinoise



potatoes, green bean shallot and bacon salad and a Boursin cheese mushroom I knew well enough that the rest of the menu wouldn't even get a look in. Of course she wasn't disappointed – far from it. Cooked to her taste the quality of the meat shone through with the indulgent potatoes and clever partnership of the Boursin and mushroom a welcome departure from the chips that are so often the classic accompaniment. For me the decision was far less straight forward. After discounting the spiced lamb rump with aromatic chick pea cassoulet (purely because I'd had lamb the evening before) and the trio of pork (because it came with Black Pudding which I never quite fancy) I was down to a three way split between the fish dishes; roasted loin of Monkfish with a curried vegetable broth, poached Halibut with tagliatelle and braised Little Gem lettuce or my eventual choice of baked Cod fillet with herb risotto, cepe mushrooms and a herb crème fraiche. Another good example of flavour combinations the cod is robust enough to hold its own alongside the quite powerful cepe and herb risotto and another very generous portion too. We once again took Pawel's recommendation and enjoyed a glass of delicious house red alongside our mains. There's an extensive wine choice at Seckford Hall but I'm a bit of a creature of habit so it was refreshing to stray away from my usual.

With a vow that we wouldn't even look at another calorie for the rest of the week we pondered the dessert menu and were particularly pleased to see the inclusion of the 1530 tasting plate – four



mini desserts, perfect for sharing. Well how could we resist? Two ladies at lunch without a dessert – unthinkable! Raspberry and lavender parfait, cinnamon doughnut, pineapple and chilli (unusual but it worked well) meringue and our favourite of the four – a white chocolate crème brûlée with raspberry sauce, truly triumphant.

While I could have happily soaked up the sunshine in the garden all afternoon it was time to enjoy our coffees and then head off to our next meeting. We may not always be blessed with perfect weather in this country but when it's here we should feel duty bound to make the most of it and the outdoor dining on offer at Seckford Hall is certainly a more than suitable way to celebrate in the sunshine. Mind you, we were catered for so well that I'm sure we'd have enjoyed a memorable lunch whatever the weather.



#### INFORMATION

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