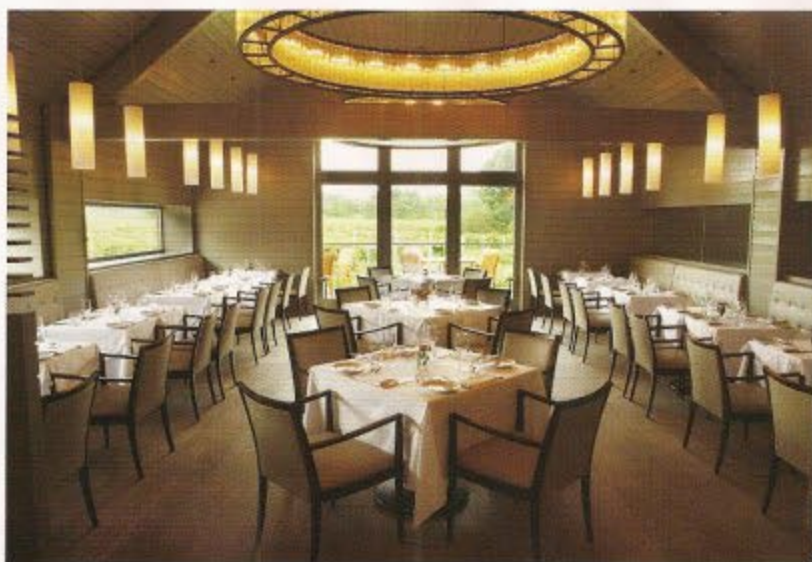


RESTAURANTS by Brian St Pierre



Above: nestled among Wickham's vines, Vatika's wood-panelled dining room is light and airy, with views across the Hampshire estate

VATIKA, WICKHAM VINEYARD, SHEDFIELD, HAMPSHIRE

Restaurants are making news in the week I write: seven in England run by celebrity chefs closed; 100,000 restaurant jobs have been lost in the US in the six months post-recession; and restaurants in San Francisco and New York were among the few real assets in Bernie Madoff's \$65 billion campaign of plunder.

Brighter news, perhaps minor but certainly promising, is that English wine-touring seems to have finally arrived; you can now say those words without irony or condescension. The vineyards are mature and pretty, and the restaurants don't resemble the forlorn tearooms of out-of-the-way 'heritage' properties as they too often did before. In Kent, Wales, and now Hampshire, Michelin-starred chefs are setting up winery restaurants.

Vatika is a venture from Atul Kochhar, one of the chefs who has so transformed Indian cooking in London, most recently at Benares. One notable feature of that and other 'modern Indian' restaurants is a good wine list, and Vatika's upholds the idea superbly,

as befits the setting. One wall of the large, airy room is floor-to-ceiling glass, overlooking the neat vineyard, which is even lit up at night, while sliding windows open on to a terrace for outdoor dining.

Head chef Jitin Joshi, who has worked at Maze as well as Benares, calls the cooking 'modern British with an Indian twist', which is about right: crusty bread comes with unsalted butter and four small tubes of spices to sprinkle over; starters include a sort of sausage of minced goat and greens with a tomato garlic sauce (delicious), veal tandoori sweetbreads (tasty but chewy) and lamb spring roll with vanilla-infused beetroot, while a subtly spicy lamb shoulder roasted for 24 hours was tenderness itself, augmented by a crunchy lamb patty and spinach dumplings. Presentation is artful and stylish, and everything but the sweetbreads was wonderfully precise.

The wine list includes some from the host vineyard, Wickham, including a light, heady white and a pleasantly musky red blend of

Pinot Noir and Rondo – a good match with the lamb. An extensive international fine wine section features the likes of Ridge, Gaja, Bruno Giacosa, Dagueneau, Livio Felluga, Zind-Humbrecht, a dozen red Bordeaux and Burgundies, as well as a Greek white and a Brazilian Merlot.

Sommelier test: The real revelation came from the genial sommelier, Costanzo Scala, who assembled the wine list at Benares before moving here. When I asked about the Wickham wines, he described the red with a concise (and accurate) summary of the Rondo's qualities, recommended it for the lamb, and then, after quickly but gently discovering I wasn't interested in white wine, steered me towards the cheapest red on the menu for the starters – Boirà Sangiovese from the southern part of Le Marche. It's organic, balanced, relatively simple but smooth, very pleasant, and an absolutely perfect match. Altogether, nicely done.

➕ Polished service

➖ Nothing, really

Wine List: ★★★★★ for range

★★★★☆ for value

Vatika, Wickham Vineyard, Botley Road, Shedfield (Southampton) SO32 2HL. Tel: +44 (0)1329 830 405. Open Wed-Sun, lunch and dinner.



Head chef Jitin Joshi (left) with Vatika's owner, Atul Kochhar