

Restaurants Tracey MacLeod

Vine dining



RESTAURANT
CRITIC
OF THE
YEAR

A restaurant attached to an English vineyard is normally best approached with caution, rather like a bottle of English wine. Sure, you'd try it, just to be polite, but let's be honest, wouldn't something French or Italian just be so much *better*? But put aside those preconceptions, because here we are in Wickham Vineyard, near Southampton, on a gorgeous sunny afternoon, and it's wonderful. Not only is the wine – a flinty, Germanic little number called Wickham Dry – going down a treat, but we're loving the room, a high-ceilinged, discreetly stylish affair somewhere between a chapel and the world's smartest barn conversion.

Picture windows look out over glorious acres of wind-ruffled vineyards. The grey walls are lined with bottles, lovingly displayed like rare artefacts. A retinue of waiting staff pads around attentively. Blimey. Who knew it would be so posh? This is the kind of place that makes you think "I knew I should have worn a jacket..." (or more accurately, in our case, "I *said* you should have worn a jacket").

The formality of the setting is carried through to the menu, which at first glance seems to offer your standard kind of posh restaurant fodder: venison carpaccio, seared scallops, roasted sea bass. But then the bread arrives – exquisite rolls scented with black onion seed or nubbly granary bread spiked with chilli and coriander, served with tiny phials of spiced salts. And then the pre-starters: a turmeric-dusted crunch of deep-fried whitebait; a creamy mouthful of chicken tikka pâté in filo pastry; and a vividly spiced ball of black lentils and rice, with a tongue-tingling dab of curried mayonnaise.

At which point, the temptation is to move on from the £6 glass of Wickham Dry to something serious from the higher slopes of the wine list. Because clearly this isn't going to be just another lunch. Vatika opened in August, under the direction of the Michelin-starred chef Atul Kochhar. But while his London restaurant Benares serves a sophisticated, European-influenced version of Indian food, here the emphasis is reversed. This isn't Indian food, but contemporary – even cutting-edge – cooking, using local ingredients and state-of-the-art techniques, in a kitchen where the tandoor sits comfortably alongside the Pacojet frozen food maker.

Vatika
Wickham Vineyard,
Botley Road, Shedfield,
Southampton
(01329 830405)

Food *****
Ambience *****
Service *****

Three courses à la carte
£35 a head before wine
and service.

Tipping policy
"Service charge is 12.5
per cent discretionary,
of which 100 per cent
goes to the staff; all tips
go to the staff"

Our starters showed just how well the head chef Jitin Joshi, whose CV includes The Capital as well as Benares, uses Indian spicing to get the most out of ingredients. Local squab pigeon was marinated in garam masala and cooked in a tandoor, giving the pink and tender breast a thrilling savoury bite to play against the sweeter notes of the accompanying pigeon and beetroot consommé. Monkfish poached in a tamarind broth came with yoghurt and cucumber parfait; a rewritten raita that worked brilliantly.

This reworking of familiar Indian dishes is a recurring theme, though it never becomes gimmicky. There's a nod to sag aloo in the spinach gnocchi, flavoured with Parmesan and cumin seeds, that accompany a main course of spiced shoulder of lamb, the meat cooked at a low temperature for 24 hours, emerging so soft it would yield to a spoon, and partnered with a punchy lamb patty and lavender-



infused yoghurt. And a lobster dish pays homage to both the chef Thomas Keller and Kerala, partnering a lobster tail poached in butter and spiced oil (inspired by a visit to Keller's French Laundry) with a Kerala-influenced lobster salad with mustard seeds and curry leaf.

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Towards the end of the meal, we were struggling to find something not to like, so flawless was the food and its delivery. It was almost a relief when one of us was brought the wrong pudding; but the manageress noticed at once and whisked both plates away with an apology, so that even this mistake ended up as a plus point. We had to console ourselves with deploring the menu's use of underscorings to summarise its offerings – "spinach_lamb" or "sardine_olive" – as though you could email each dish a thank you message when you got home.

By the time we got to "coffee bill", we'd spent around £55 a head, including wine and service, though we could have romped madly through a well-chosen wine list that's compiled to appeal to wine tourists, with a heavy emphasis on fine vintages.

Vatika obviously has ambitions beyond the local, and already word seems to have spread; some dressed-up ladies were in for a birthday celebration, and several tables of gastronomers seemed to have made longer journeys. One group even moved outside to finish lunch on the terrace. Surrounded by sun-kissed vines, they could have been in Tuscany, rather than just off the A334.

Driving home, we felt like we'd taken our mouths on a little holiday. "That must be one of the best restaurants in Britain," reflected my companion, who isn't given to hyperbole. Vatika is rewriting the rulebook, and doing it with confidence and the lightest of touches. Never mind those French and Italian wallahs – this is Modern British food at its best, and it's thrilling. ✨

Side Orders A fine bunch

Chapel Down
Try Richard Phillips' Kentish venison with Chapel Down red wine sauce (£16.95) at this stunning vineyard.
Tenterden Vineyard, Small Hythe, Tenterden, Kent
(01580 761616)

The Leaping Hare
This award-winning restaurant serves exemplary seasonal food; open Friday and Saturday evenings only.
Wyken Hall Vineyard, Stanton, Bury St Edmunds
(01359 250287)

Calon
Mains include a salmon confit with fricassée of Penclawdd cockles and Cariad wine at this glorious vineyard.
Llanerch Vineyard, Hensol, Pendoylan, Wales
(01443 225877)