



HISTORICAL SETTING: CONTEMPORARY DINING

MARK NICHOLLS ENJOYS A SPOT OF FINE DINING AT THE HISTORIC MAIDS HEAD HOTEL IN NORWICH



WHEN IT COMES TO HISTORIC hotels and restaurants, few can match the stories the Maids Head Hotel can tell. A former residence of bishops, a coaching inn from the 16th century and a bar where Nelson is said to have had a drink or two, there's a tale in every corner of this landmark building in the shadow of Norwich Cathedral. 



The Maids Head Hotel

- EATING OUT -

Of course, everyone likes a slice of the Nelson story, but given that a young Horatio went to school just across the road in the cathedral precincts, tales of him enjoying his first pint there are highly likely to be true.

Today, as a four-star hotel with individuality – and the odd spot of quirkiness – it is also home to a restaurant with a growing reputation for some of the finest cuisine in Norfolk.

With two AA Rosettes (and in search of a third) and under the tenure of a Head Chef named 'Magic', the WinePress has an invitingly attractive menu that my wife Sharon and I were delighted to sample.

Having popped into Norwich on a Tuesday evening we found ourselves seated in the wood-panelled Snug, one of the oldest parts of the hotel with prints of Lord and Ladies on the wall and its very own letter box.

This is where, over the centuries, travellers would sit by the fire awaiting the Stage Coach in the days when the Maids Head was a busy coaching inn.

At that time, there was enough stabling for up to 100 horses and the area where the WinePress Restaurant sits is effectively the courtyard of a 15th century inn.

Nearby is the atmospheric oak-lined Jacobean bar for a pre-dinner drink and where you can expect to see beers from Adnams, Lacons and the like on offer as well as the hotel's signature brew, Maids Head Ale from Woodfordes.

With an a la carte menu, or a tasting menu (£70), the choice was varied with innovative dishes conjured up by Magic – real name Marcin Pomierny.

Over an amuse bouche of broccoli and crème fraîche, we made our selections.

I love scallops so was instantly attracted to the scallops with curried carrot velouté, cauliflower couscous, almonds and coriander (£9.50) and it was stunning. The individual flavours seeped through to offer a spectacular start to our meal.

Sharon was equally impressed with the Smoked Dedham Vale beef brisket, horseradish gel, celeriac remoulade, pickled pumpkin and mushroom consommé jelly (£8).

Cured mackerel fillet or Norfolk game pie were also among the starters.

THE WINEPRESS RESTAURANT, MAIDS HEAD HOTEL, TOMBLAND, NORWICH



Between courses we absorbed the history of the Maids Head Hotel, wondering who had passed through this snug room over the centuries, or waited cosily for the next stage coach before venturing out on a blustery autumnal evening on the next leg of a horse-drawn journey.

The Maids Head lays claims to be the oldest hotel in the UK, dating back more than 800 years. Built in a range of architectural styles from Tudor, Georgian and Jacobean, it was the location of the palace of the first Norman Bishop of Norwich, Herbert de Losinga, meaning the site has effectively been in continuous use for hospitality since the middle of the 1090s.

As well as fine food, the WinePress – as you would expect – has an impressive cellar with around 50 different wines.

Pairing my starter with an Australian white – a Catnip Viognier, Rusty Mutt from McLaren Vale (£8.50 for 175 ml) – I then switched to a lovely South African red – Pinotage Clefs Classic (£9.50 for 250ml) – for my main course.

I chose the perfectly-pink Norfolk venison with thyme potato terrine, baby beetroot, red cabbage and blackberries (£26) while Sharon chose the duo of lamb with lemon verbena panisse, stem broccoli and Jerusalem artichoke (£24). The menu also included the interesting cod, crispy chicken and caramelised cauliflower puree and saffron potato fondant (£23) and other dishes including duck breast (£24) or stone bass, rainbow chard, charred cucumber, mussels, grapefruit and sauce Americaine (£23).

Once again, the flavours were immense; individually defined yet blending seamlessly for a wonderful overall taste and beautifully presented.

A delicious 'gift from the kitchen' of sparkling wine sorbet with cucumber and apple salsa was a lovely surprise and paved the way for the finale of dessert: peanut butter parfait, chocolate crèmeux, honeycomb, banana, salt caramel ice cream, mango compote and lime (£8) for me; and carrot cake, coconut mascarpone, candied walnuts, poached apple and cinnamon ice cream (also £8) for Sharon.

The Maids Head Hotel – and the WinePress – is becoming increasingly recognised for some of the best local and seasonal dishes in the county under one of Norfolk's leading chefs. Chef of the Year in the EDP Norfolk Food and Drink Awards 2016, Magic this year reached the semi-final of the Craft Guild of Chefs National Chef of the Year competition.



Originally from Krakow in Poland, he trained in his home country before moving to Norwich in June 2005, taking a job as a kitchen porter at Tatlers and later working for Pulse, The Library and Mackintosh's Canteen, and as Sous Chef at Rare Steak House. He was Head Chef at The Mad Moose, before joining the Maids Head Hotel in 2013.

As we rounded the meal off with mint tea and coffee, he explained how he is always working on new dishes and flavours, seeking inspiration from local produce which forms the majority of a menu that changes quarterly with the seasons.

'I would think up to 80 per cent of produce is local,' he tells me, 'and we are always looking to work with farmers and local producers for those special ingredients.'

'We are also looking forward to next year; with a new kitchen, working on new menus with the team, and also pushing for a third AA Rosette.'

The WinePress restaurant is to have a new look for 2019 as part of the hotel's ongoing multi-million-pound redevelopment and an integral part of that design will be an 'open' kitchen, allowing diners to see Magic and his team working away at their culinary wizardry on tasty new dishes and flavours.



www.maidsheadhotel.co.uk