



food and drink

Great expectations

Jonathan Carter had high hopes, but finds that he is swept away by Mallory Court's fine food, luxury and easy pleasure

Do you believe in love at first sight? Just one quick look, a friendly smile followed by a warm glow that tells you this is the one? Despite my romantic aspirations, I've always found it a dangerous sentiment to yield to when selecting a cracking place to dine out. But I'm having a serious rethink about such cynicism after a glorious evening at the Mallory Court Hotel.

Situated just a hefty stone's throw from Royal Leamington Spa, the Mallory is the leading lady in Sir Peter Rigby's Eden Collection, a small group of luxury hotels dotted throughout the country. A staggeringly beautiful country house set in ten acres of lovely landscaped gardens, the Mallory has long enjoyed a fine reputation for providing the highest quality dining in the region. Head chef, Simon Haigh joined the hotel nearly a decade ago and having secured a much-coveted Michelin star in his first year (an amazing achievement in its own right), Mallory has retained its star for nine consecutive years.

So you'll forgive me if we arrived with high expectations, but from the moment we arrived, it was pretty apparent these would be exceeded. Having been warmly greeted in the hotel's impressive courtyard by the utterly charming restaurant manager, Dominique, we eased into some huge armchairs and squashy sofas to enjoy pre-dinner drinks and some really fine nibbles. These included delicate spring rolls with pickled ginger, gorgeous little crispy pea risotto balls and homemade



salted popcorn. I was getting giddy already, and my better half implored me to calm down.

As you would expect, the wine list was extensive and impressive so if you want to indulge and push the boat out you won't be disappointed. But perhaps more surprising (and certainly refreshingly) was the inclusion of some lovely options around the £20 mark. It was especially heart warming to see wines stocked by the local Welcombe Hills Vineyard. Feeling incredibly proud to be British we opted for their Bacchus, which was fruity, aromatic and delicious.

We settled into the beautiful dining room for the main event. And what a great room it is: stylish décor, fantastic

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views, plenty of space between tables, and a relaxed atmosphere. We were surrounded by other families, friends and lovers having a fantastic time, which is always uplifting. Bring on the fare!

To start with I was drawn to the foie gras "bon bon" with pickled cherries, duck pastilla and smoked duck. It was beautifully balanced and the pastilla in particular was utterly delicious. Meanwhile my partner had plumped for the quail breast with a celeriac and apple mousse and pressed apple. The succulent, gamey flesh of the quail combined brilliantly with the light mousse

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and intense sweetness from the apple. A terrific start that was soon to be surpassed by the mains.

I'd opted for the fillet of beef with braised then stuffed oxtail, new season garlic and onion textures. All exceptionally good, but the deep, meaty flavours and texture of the oxtail was the undoubted star. The brunette had chosen the pan-fried fillet of John Dory with chorizo, scallop and salsify poached in port and red wine. The fish, as you would expect, was perfectly cooked and interestingly enhanced by the punchy notes of chorizo and wonderfully unusual salsify.

There was a fine selection of puddings but I was looking no further than the nougat and honeycomb parfait, with poached apricots and raspberries which was incredible. Shelley had been eyeing up the cheese board all night and the Epoisses in particular (a powerful and pungent French equivalent of Stinking Bishop) will live long in the memory for all the right reasons. We retired back to the lounge area for coffee and somehow found room for the excellent petit fours.

So the boring bit about prices. This is Michelin starred cuisine so it's obviously not cheap, but it is genuinely good value, especially when stacked up against other establishments competing at this exceptionally high level. The three-course dinner menu with two options for each course comes in at £45, and the full a la carte option is priced at £59.50 (both inclusive of coffee and petit fours). For die-hard gastronomes there's also a seven course tasting menu from £79. Either way, you are guaranteed exceptional produce and incredibly well-flavoured dishes.

There is something very special about Mallory Court and although obviously nothing is perfect, it was a real head-scratcher trying to find genuine fault. Maybe my partner's post-dinner coffee wasn't quite up to scratch but my machiato was terrific. It's simply a class act, where luxury and style sit very comfortably with easy pleasure. At the time of writing there are strong rumours that the Eden Collection is expanding into Worcestershire through acquiring one of the region's best hotels. Please God let it become another Mallory Court. ■