

# Complete dining joy makes place a must-visit

**W**EDDINGS have become events and whatever the location or style, every bride wants a day to remember.

Masses of planning goes into making it just that, with the groom tending to go along with his bride's ideas, content to be spared involvement in the excruciating detail of table plans, place settings and menus. This is perhaps the first lesson in married life, which is: Unless you are asked directly for your opinion, look interested and keep quiet.

Almost every local hotel offers special packages for the big day, with catering options reflecting the range of budgets and tastes. At the luxury

## TABLE FOR 2 GEOFF LAWS

**Horton Grange Country House Hotel and Restaurant, Ponteland**

end are mansions with marquees and flowing Champagne, while a boutique bistro approach provides a very different take on the celebration. It's horses for courses.

Horton Grange near Ponteland brings to the field a wonderful setting, including a beautiful Japanese water garden and an



**SCENIC** Horton Grange is an attractive house with a lovely garden.



**ELEGANT VENUE** Horton Grange Country House Hotel and Restaurant near Ponteland.

elegant hotel with restaurant to match. It's been a while since I was last here and, in that time, the garden has matured and the kitchen has got even better, as our meal proved.

My companion had shed her usual jodhpurs and wellies for a sophisticated dress and high heels, which meant I was driving. Dropped off at the door, she was ensconced on a super-comfy sofa in the lounge and half way down a G&T by the time I returned from parking the car. She's a fast mover!

The menu matched her outfit and we set about the task of deciding which of the elegant dishes to have. After some discussion we made our choices, were shown to our table by the very affable Stefan and began what turned out to be a superb dining experience.

First up were my lighter-than-air blue cheese fritters with tomato chutney. If ever there was a dish to be garlanded with praise, this was it. Perfect puffs of deep-fried, crumb-coated cheese, each with a melting heart, had plenty of salty punch. The gently piquant chutney countered the power of the cheese with fruity sweetness. A crunch of salad leaves and here was an exquisite dish.

Her tomato and warm goat's cheese tart with pesto was another first-class offering. A disc of beautifully light puff pastry, covered with slices of lightly roasted tomato laced with pesto, surrounded a hub of creamy goat's cheese hiding under a fresh salad leaf garnish. The crisp pastry, herby pesto, rich cheese and sweet tomatoes were deeply satisfying.

When there's this much talent in the kitchen, food goes to another level. Chef Gary Main's grilled lemon sole with capers and parsley butter proved the point. The delicate sole lay beneath a knobbly cover of green capers surrounded by glistening parsley butter. The fish lifted gently away in moist slices, leaving only the cartoon skeleton behind as evidence that here was once a delicious fish. Some al dente green beans and finely sliced shallots added extra colour and crunch and I was one very happy diner.

My companion's peppered fillet steak demonstrated the chef's skill at the other end of the spectrum. The robust, peppercorn-encrusted steak was perfectly cooked, with a

blood-red interior, caramelised coating and a creamy sauce punctuated with peppery fizz. With the succulent, grained meat full of juice, there was no need for a steak knife because it fell easily away in juicy folds.

A stack of thick-cut chips dotted with excellent rock salt and a gently-dressed mixed salad were all that was needed to complete the masterpiece.

Desserts beckoned and we succumbed to temptation. The rhubarb and Sauterne trifle with candied orange was a hugely successful combination of sweet-sharp rhubarb and vanilla cream custard topped with a generous scoop of cream with crescents of candied orange arcing over the cocktail glass. The clementine sorbet, a refined trio of fruity ice with a flourish of pistachio tuille, provided a fine finish to a flawless meal.

From beginning to end this meal was a complete joy and makes Horton Grange a must-visit restaurant that has zoomed back in to my top three of local bests.

## INFORMATION

**Address:** Horton Grange Country House Hotel and Restaurant, Berwick Hill, Ponteland NE13 6BU Tel: (01661) 860686

**Open:** Monday-Saturday noon-2pm, 6.30pm-9.30pm; Sunday noon-2pm. Booking essential because of frequent functions.

**Where is it?** About a mile and a half north of Dinnington.

**First impressions:** Understated elegance and class.

**Welcome:** Relaxed and very

friendly.

**Style, design and furnishings:** Country house chic with old gold and burgundy in the lounge and reflected in a more modern presentation in the dining room that looks out on the beautifully designed Japanese water garden.

**Cuisine:** The very best of modern British.

**Wine:** Domaine de Saint Veran, 2000. Puits de Peiguins. French at its everyday best. Fine smoky

body with citrus edge and good lemony colour.

**Service:** Smoothly professional with a personal touch from beginning to end. Stefan has bags of jolly personality and clearly enjoys his job.

**Value:** Not cheap at £112.92 including a G&T, two coffees and a 10% surcharge, but worth every penny.

**Parking:** Car park.

**Disabled facilities:** Fully accessible.



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