

A night at the races

Nicholas Lander finds the cooks in too much of a hurry at a chic new hotel's restaurant

Cheltenham, in Gloucestershire, south-west England, hosts festivals – of jazz, literature and, later this month, horses. The annual National Hunt Festival draws thousands to Cheltenham's famous racecourse, and this year some of them will be staying at the Montpellier Chapter Hotel, which opened near the Ladies' College in November last year.

This chic, 61-room establishment with bar and restaurant is owned by Chapter Hotels, a new division of the Hong Kong-based Swire Hotels group. The Montpellier is its first British hotel, with others planned for Bristol, Brighton and Exeter over the coming year.

Brian Williams, the managing director who was with the Mandarin Oriental hotel group in Asia for many years, is the man in charge, while food writer and chef Simon Hopkinson, co-owner of Bibendum restaurant in London's Fulham Road, is menu consultant.

As we approached the hotel at 7.30pm one Saturday, Cheltenham's popular Montpellier district resembled London's West End, with taxis dropping off women in staggeringly high heels outside bars and restaurants.

The hotel entrance is exquisite. The glass doors were carefully renovated by the new owners and are engraved with the initials SH – the building first opened as the Savoy Hotel in 1847.

Once inside, we were led away from the sounds of the busy bar and restaurant, past the modern, glassed-in courtyard to our bedroom at the rear, with an unintentional reminder of my advancing years. After demonstrating how to work the lights and giving us the wireless network password, the receptionist pointed to the iPhone that was at our disposal for the duration of our stay, and asked, "You do know how to use an iPhone, don't you?"

A little later, as we sat in the corner of the bar, with a dish of Parmesan biscuits and the menu, we were presented with another piece of gadgetry, this time an



Modernised The open kitchen at the Montpellier Chapter's restaurant

iPad wine list. It was frustrating to handle, but not because of my age. The way the wines had been listed, spelled and categorised was chaotic, and the whole thing was littered with typos.

The menu, however, was a more pleasurable read, and resonated with Hopkinson's principles. This meant correct English, so it is "crisp" duck with a watercress and radish salad rather than "crispy" duck, as it is so often written. British, French and Italian dishes that have stood the test of time are juxtaposed on the menu and exude good taste. There are potted shrimps next to a terrine de campagne before a butternut squash risotto and a fillet steak au poivre. I was tempted by the grill section, and ordered the lamb cutlets, almost as much for the mint béarnaise as the meat.

The restaurant, with its two large bay windows and high ceilings, must have witnessed some rather grand parties and dances over the years, and it has been sympathetically modernised.

The open kitchen has been given great prominence, occupying the entire far wall, with passageways on either side leading to

the main kitchen behind. The waiters warm the bread in a gas oven at the front of the kitchen before serving it. But it was this very openness that bothered me.

All I could see was too many young, anxious cooks doing their utmost to serve their customers quickly but never seeming to stop to taste whether what was being sent out was good enough. The "crisp" duck salad and marinated salmon with white crab meat were both reasonable. But the lamb cutlets were under-seasoned; the mint béarnaise tasted as though it depended heavily on commercial mint sauce; and the fishcakes were amateurish and flabby. The desserts were impossibly large.

Restaurateurs will envy the exuberance Williams has installed in his team. But on the evidence of the wine list and with the relatively simple dishes, it is a restaurateur's touch that this otherwise sensitive renovation still lacks.

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