

Shropshire Star

“It isn't fussy or pretentious, just good, well-cooked, well-presented food that you really want to enjoy”



Mussel in – shellfish with bacon and peppers



Pretty and rural – The Swan at Forton



Get in my belly! – the pork belly came with a honey and dijon jus. It tasted as good as it looked



Dear dairy – the deep-fried breaded brie was a hit with The Vegetarian



Cosy – but it's a pity the fires weren't on



Sharp words – the elegant lemon meringue pie

Pictures by Russell Davies

I just Swan to go back for more

It might be a traditional country pub, but the menu at The Swan at Forton is full of surprises. Andrew Owen samples the treats on offer



Old world charm – sink into a leather Chesterfield

THE SWAN AT FORTON
Eccleshall Road, Newport,
TF10 8BY
★★★★☆

Years ago, during its days as a coaching inn, many customers would have arrived at The Swan at Forton by horse.

We, too, used a type of horse to reach the pub/restaurant/hotel – well, all right, we arrived by Shanks's Pony. Does that count?

The walk was my idea. The Swan, you see, is only a mile and a half, or thereabouts, from the heart of Newport and sits just over the county border in Staffordshire.

Forton is a very pretty, very little, very rural village with a picture postcard church, a scattering of old houses and an unusual skew bridge that carries both the road and what's left of the canal over the River Meese.

It's a lovely place for a walk, so it made sense to go on foot rather than drive. At least we'd have an appetite.

However, as the well-known proverb tells us, 'The road to good intentions is paved but the A519 to Eccleshall can be a bit busy with enormous lorries at night and nobody's bothered to put in street lighting, so a pleasant afternoon

stroll in July becomes a completely different kettle of fish on an early October evening' (Or something like that.)

For starters, the moon had cleared off for the night and I had only a small keyring torch, and for seconds The Vegetarian, who was accompanying me, had somehow managed to reach into her Imelda Marcos shoe collection only to choose a pair that were not suitable for walking any distance at all. (And, look, I know I have little knowledge of women's footwear, but shouldn't 'being able to walk in them' be the very least you should expect for your money?)

"This had better be worth it," she hissed in the darkness in a blistered sort of way.

But when we got to the door and stepped in, it was clear that it was indeed worth it. Even if the food turned out to be a disappointment the setting would make up for it.

Wobbly

The Swan has a large, open bar with a wooden floor, oak beams in the ceiling and plenty of seating, including an old leather Chesterfield sofa. It's a comfortable room, cosy and welcoming on a cold night – although it was a pity they hadn't got one of the fires going.

After ordering drinks we sat for a short while before being shown to our table.

The Swan is an 18th century building, but a conservatory has been added to increase the size of the dining area. We were given a slightly wobbly table for two by the window. It was about 8.30pm by the time we sat down, and although the Swan wasn't heaving, it was busy.

The menus were presented to us by a friendly waitress and we saw that there was plenty of choice.

Some of the options seemed quite exotic for a country pub. For example, the starters included hoi sin and slow

“It's comfortable, cosy and welcoming. It was a pity they hadn't got a fire going”

roasted pork belly (with pan-seared black pearl scallop, pickled shallots and chargrilled baby gem) for £6.45, and among the mains there was chargrilled chicken forestiere (with silver skin onions, mushrooms and smoked bacon in red wine sauce) for £13.95.

The main menu also offered two types of burger, lamb rump, whole baked seabass and homemade steak and blue cheese pie among its 17 choices. (Although one – the steak and ale pie – had sold out.)

And then there were the specials, including a 24oz rump steak, a mixed grill, and pan fried venison steak wich was wrapped in parma ham with a rich redcurrant and shallot reduction, and 'sizzling' grill platters involving chicken breast, salmon fillet and gammon.

However, my mind was made up the moment I spotted

fresh, lightly-steamed mussels, which I decided to follow with slow roasted pork belly and chorizo purely because I didn't have a clue what to expect.

The Vegetarian went for the pork belly followed by the pan-seared sirloin steak topped with peppered salami and blue cheese. Actually, that's not true. She chose to begin with crisp fried brie cheese and followed with a roasted vegetable lasagne.

We ummed and arred over a bottle of wine, but our choice, admittedly the cheapest on the menu, was out of stock, so we ordered from the bar.

The wait for the starters wasn't a long one, and the food was excellent.

The brie was exactly as described – small balls of brie, deep-fried and served with a 'mild spiced tomato, chilli and herb fresh relish'.

I'm used to mussels in a white wine sauce. At The Swan they're served in a tomato herb sauce with bacon, peppers and onions, and very good they taste, too.

The mains were equally impressive. Mine involved a reasonably big square of pork belly on top of roast potatoes and carrots and served with a honey and dijon mustard jus.

The Vegetarian's lasagne was equally good, with plenty of cheese and plenty of vegetables, a side salad and two slices of very garlicky bread. Too much, in fact, for her to finish, so I manfully stepped in to help.

We both praised the way the courses looked, the way they were presented. It isn't fussy or pretentious, just good, well-cooked, well-presented food that you really want to enjoy. And you will.

To finish I had a berry crumble, which came with a small jug of custard, while my guest had lemon meringue. Both cost £5.95, which is not particularly cheap, but it's not as if you're doing this every night of the week.

In short, I'd happily recommend the Swan at Forton, although unless it's the summer you might want to drive or cudge a lift.

As for us, we took a taxi back.

MENU SAMPLE

STARTERS

Hoi sin and honey slow roasted pork belly, served with a pan seared black pearl scallop, pickled shallots and chargrilled baby gem – £6.45

Swan's prawn Marie Rose cocktail, with toasted ciabatta – £6.45

Fresh lightly steamed mussels, with bacon, peppers and onions in a rich tomato herb sauce – £5.95

MAINS

Oven roasted lamb rump, with a dijon and herb crust, served with chorizo, baby onions and garden peas – £16.95

Swan's beefburger, with bacon and cheese in a bun with onion rings, chips, coleslaw and a mixed salad – £10.95

DESSERTS (ALL £5.95 EACH)

Chef's crumble of the day, in an individual pot with a jug of custard
Winter spiced bread and butter pudding with custard