



# Refreshed and refreshing

James Day visits the Royal Victoria where the menu and the décor are new

Newport is not known for being the gourmet capital of, well anywhere really. Though it has a good selection of pubs and restaurants, the main focus for foodies is Waitrose, which, while supporting some great up and coming local producers is hardly a dining destination.

Then there is The Royal Victoria – a landmark in the town but not, in recent times, reputed for its great food.

Now it has new owners who have undertaken quite a task over recent months updating the décor, refurbishing the restaurant and bedrooms and introducing a chic menu.

When we arrived in Newport finding a parking space was surprisingly easy – and free – that really is a rarity and a plus these days. And the Royal Vic itself is a surprise – a rather grandiose building standing at the end of the picturesque cobbled St Mary's Street but with Continental-style umbrellas and chairs and tables outside. Inside it's a different story. The décor is subdued, pan-Asian, with colonial influences. I later discovered the style is South Korean, heavily influenced by the origins of the owners.

The building has a public bar with relaxed seating and plasma TV, while on the opposite side is the brasserie bar and restaurant. We were greeted by a welcoming offer of a drink, and chose a glass of house white from the wine list, and bottle of sparkling water.

We sat in the brasserie bar to make our selections from the menu. It is clear that there has been a real focus on attention to detail on the refurbishment, a clever blending of colours, and natural textures and although the style is minimalist, it is far from cold – there is a real sense of being in some far flung foreign land.

There is a choice of menus at lunchtime. The newly launched 'Modern British Lunch' offers just that – classic British dishes served with a modern twist, such as Roasted asparagus, parmesan, tomato and rocket salad at £4.50; Smoked haddock and spring



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onion fish cakes with garden salad (£4.95) or Chicken liver with smoked bacon paté with melba toast (£4.50). Mains were equally tempting with choices from Battered white fish and handcut chips, mushy peas and tartar sauce (£7.25), to Ladymoor Farm Shropshire ham, egg and hand cut chips (£7.25). All these, alongside another six mains can be pre-ordered with a turn-around promise of 45 minutes for shoppers and business folk who need to return to their busy lives, after a quick refuel.

The à la carte selection is equally tempting and a little more adventurous in the ingredients with starters such as Warm salad of asparagus, crisp bacon, fried duck egg, and shaved parmesan (£4.95), which my guest plumped for, and Pan fried oak

smoked salmon, horseradish crème fraîche and baby leaf salad (£4.50), which I selected. From the seven mains, she decided on the Poached fillet of coley, mushroom and mussel broth with vegetable pappardella (£10.95), and I chose the Lemon and herb chicken with roast potatoes and salad garnish.

The restaurant could be set in Raffles Hotel in Singapore – a highly polished grand piano decked with fresh flowers sets the scene for a night of Singapore Slings and opulence, but I am reminded by my guest that we are in Newport, Shropshire.

Shortly after being seated our starters arrived, which were presented to perfection – 'The Team' must have been working hard behind the scenes to ensure all looked



good, but what about the flavour? No problems there either – my oak smoked salmon was delicate in flavour, and texture – lightly falling away as my fork tucked into the tender fish, which was perfectly balanced by the horseradish crème fraîche. I must admit seeing the asparagus salad, my teenage side came out thinking: "I want both" but luckily I was able to try a little of that too – again perfectly balanced, with tasty, crisp Shropshire bacon and a rich yellow free-range duck egg. We soon ticked off our starters and I began to think that even though we were not on the express lunch menu, we could manage the 45-minute turnaround.

True to form, the mains soon arrived. Again, 10 out of 10 for presentation, but what about the flavour? 'The Team' had come up trumps there again too, I could smell the Italian herbs which coated my chicken before I took a bite and the sautéed asparagus and green bean salad were al dente as they should be, and perfectly fresh. The real surprise was the 'mussel broth' that accompanied the fillet of coley – there were more mussels than a large portion of moules marinières, and the quality was certainly evident in the size, flavour and texture. The coley was moist, and again, cooked to perfection.

For puddings my guest chose a luscious meringue with summer fruits and I went for a

favourite – crème brûlée. This was one of the best I have had the pleasure to consume, rich in vanilla and egg with a perfect light creamy texture, and a crisp sugar top – one you could stand on!

So time to meet 'The Team' – a few minutes later a very unassuming 'lad' arrived, who introduced himself as "Darren Barnes Head Chef". When I congratulated him on his 'team's' efforts, he pointed out that he only had one more person in the kitchen, who was in fact his NVQ assessor from Radbrook College doing his final assessment. He explained how much he loves to cook with regional produce and experimenting with flavours and presentation. So I recommend that you book a table and challenge young Darren's talents – and let him challenge your views on Newport's culinary offerings. ■

**Food Style:** Modern British – focusing on regional ingredients.

**Most Popular Dish:** New Modern British Lunch – fish is popular.

**Cost of Meal:** £42.65 including drinks  
Gourmet Life discount – 20% = £35.32.

**Worth knowing:** Pre-order ensures 45 minute turn-around on Modern British menu.

**Accommodation:** Also available from £50 per night, B&B.

James Day is the owner of Gourmet Life, the Shropshire-based Midlands dining club which supports local producers and offers discounted dining at some of the region's leading restaurants and inns. To find out how you can dine for less at the The Royal Victoria and many other venues go to [www.gourmet-life.co.uk](http://www.gourmet-life.co.uk) or telephone 0845 8386364. For more reviews visit [www.shropshirelifemagazine.co.uk](http://www.shropshirelifemagazine.co.uk)

## OTHER SHROPSHIRE RESTAURANTS IN CLASSIC BUILDINGS

■ Wroxeter Hotel, near Shrewsbury – family owned, set in rolling countryside, just opposite the vineyard and Roman ruins. Tel: 01743 761256  
[www.thewroxeterhotel.co.uk](http://www.thewroxeterhotel.co.uk)

■ Fishmore Hall – just outside Ludlow, offering stunning views, and adventurous dishes created by head chef Dave Joram. Tel: 01584 875 148  
[www.fishmorehall.co.uk](http://www.fishmorehall.co.uk)

■ Old Rectory, Wem – Georgian classic, sympathetically restored, and offering classic British dining. Tel: 01939 233233  
[www.oldrectorywem.co.uk](http://www.oldrectorywem.co.uk)

■ The Oaktree Restaurant at The Bringewood Hotel Burrington near Ludlow – once a cow shed, and now a refurbished restaurant and hotel, in an unrivalled setting and stunning views. Tel: 01568 770 033  
[www.thebringewood.co.uk](http://www.thebringewood.co.uk)

■ Chez Maw Restaurant, The Valley Hotel, Ironbridge once the home of the creator of Maw's tiles, this riverside setting is the perfect location for pre-dinner drinks. Tel: 01952 432247  
[www.thevalleyhotel.co.uk](http://www.thevalleyhotel.co.uk)



The Royal Victoria, St. Mary's Street, Newport, tel: 01952 811 546  
[www.theroyalvictoriahotel.com](http://www.theroyalvictoriahotel.com)