

# Restaurants

# The price is just right at this charming restaurant

Poor service and overpriced food are things of the past at The Saracens

Rewind four years through the Shropshire Star archives to a review written by one N Rous, a man who long since departed restaurant critiquing duties in this parish. It lamented the failings of The Saracens, at Hadnall, and pointed out two critical faults.

Firstly, our critic wrote, the Saracens's young staff were inexperienced and, therefore, unable to offer him the sort of silver service he expected. Secondly, and less easy for the restaurant to ameliorate, its prices were too high.

The Saracens operated the sort of charging policy that our reviewer would have expected to find at a fancy dan restaurant that offered an amuse bouche and pre-dessert as part of the entry fee.

The food, incidentally, was spot on.

Now fast forward to 2011. There were two young waiters and an experienced maitre d working a moderately busy dining room when my friend and I enjoyed a midweek dinner for two.

## Credit

The staff – and I have no way of knowing whether they were the same people who worked there in 2007 – were a credit to the venue. Alan Hansen was wrong when he opined that you don't win anything with youngsters. The two young waiting staff have won The Saracens an extra star, ensuring it is upgraded from three stars to four.

Throughout our evening, they were exemplary. Ryan, whose name appeared on our bill, was politeness personified; he'd also got more than a modicum of front-of-house skill. He was attentive and deferential throughout,

## The Saracens, Hadnall



Inside the attractive dining room



The Saracens has improved greatly since 2007

**The Saracens:** Shrewsbury Road, Hadnall, SY4 4AG  
**Telephone:** 01939 210877, [www.saracensathadnall.co.uk](http://www.saracensathadnall.co.uk)  
**Rating:** ☆☆☆☆

making repeat visits to our table to make sure we were content with both food and service.

His partner, a young-ish woman with a winning smile, was similarly accomplished. They worked in tandem like a well-oiled machine. Other diners made requests of them: more bread, a side order of this or that, extra drinks and they responded with good grace and perfect manners. If the 2007 prices were too high, the 2011 prices were spot on. Our dinner for two – which we'll turn to presently – was exceptional value at £63 with drinks.

The food was of a high quality, without being exceptional, the environment was convivial and my heart didn't skip a beat when I paid for it.

In short, the two issues identified by our former critic were resolved to this diner's complete satisfaction. The past is a different

country, of course, they do things differently there. And so to dinner. The Saracens is run by Allison, from Texas, and Ben, from England, who met by chance at a barbecue in the mountains of Japan in 1998.

They worked together for two years in London before touching down in Hadnall in 2003. Since then, they've worked tirelessly to create one of Shropshire's better restaurants. Their hard work is paying off. The Saracens has a delightful bar and dining room, which are characterised by unfussy decorations and neutral tones.

Chef Ben has an impressive sourcing policy and his ingredients can be traced back to local suppliers or his parents' south Shropshire farm. Maitre d Allison, meanwhile, has a kind and engaging manner, that clearly rubs off on her young waiting staff.

We were shown to our table where we

enjoyed two varieties of homemade bread and a deliciously-garlicky hummus.

My friend then started with the seared yellow fin tuna with a kalamata olive, tomato and caper salad and aged balsamic. It had been cooked a little too thoroughly, but was a well-constructed dish.

I opted for crayfish tails in a lemon and dill jelly with a salad of micro shoots. The crayfish was delicious and, with more fearless seasoning, it would have been a memorable dish. My friend's main course soon arrived, a deliciously creamy dish of corn-fed chicken. She smiled throughout and marvelled at the quality of chef Ben's cooking. The chicken was moist and delightfully savoury.

I opted for a slow-roasted belly of Maynard's pork, with blackpudding, crushed celeriac, apple and sag jus. It was the finest dish of the night. There was a slender strip of perfectly crisp crackling and the dish was a winner. The pork was cooked well, so that the fat had rendered through the sweet meat.

## Thrilling

The savoury black pudding and sweet/acid apple were equally thrilling. There was little that could have been done to improve it.

For dessert, my friend opted for the mango panacotta with a passion fruit syrup and sugar snap while I choose the ginger and treacle parkin, with a hot toffee sauce. They were both reasonable, without wowing either of us. Our former critic concluded his 2007 review by saying disappointment reigned supreme because Saracens had failed to fulfil its potential.

No doubt if he returned, he'd eat his words, as well as the delicious food. Ben and Allison have worked hard to achieve notable standards. Any deficiencies that may have existed have been long since ironed out, certainly in terms of the service and pricing structure.

The Saracens is unlikely to ever become one of the county's finest restaurants, it's just not in the market for Michelin stars. It is, however, one of the best value, mid-to-upper range restaurants that our county has. Ben, Allison and their young and professional team deserve every congratulation.

Andy Richardson