



Celebrating its tenth birthday this year, Milsoms Kesgrave Hall, the luxurious boutique hotel and restaurant just outside Ipswich, has an enviable reputation. **Lesley Rawlinson** reports

PERFECT 10

Wandering through the chic lounge and bar at Kesgrave Hall it's hard to imagine some of this building's past lives. Throughout its 200 year history the impressive country house, set in pretty woodlands, has had a variety of uses including no less than five boarding schools. During the war the Hall was even used by the RAF, and by the pilots of the USAF 359th Fighter Squadron who were involved in aerial operations over Europe from nearby RAF Martlesham Heath.

But ten years ago Hills Building Group and the Milsom Hotel Group bought the Hall and with considerable investment and a vision that would see further developments in the ensuing decade, the utterly charming Milsoms Kesgrave Hall was created.

I use the word 'chic' reservedly. Not because the entire building doesn't ooze with luxurious touches and plenty of 'wow' factor because, of course, it does – but there's no dress code here. No untold set of slightly uptight rules that must be followed, no pre-set agenda for guests...simply arrive, relax and enjoy in whatever way you prefer.

Part of this very flexible approach is that there's absolutely no need to book in advance – in fact the restaurant doesn't take bookings. Was that a sharp intake of breath? Fear not – what's the worst that could happen? At a very busy time there might be

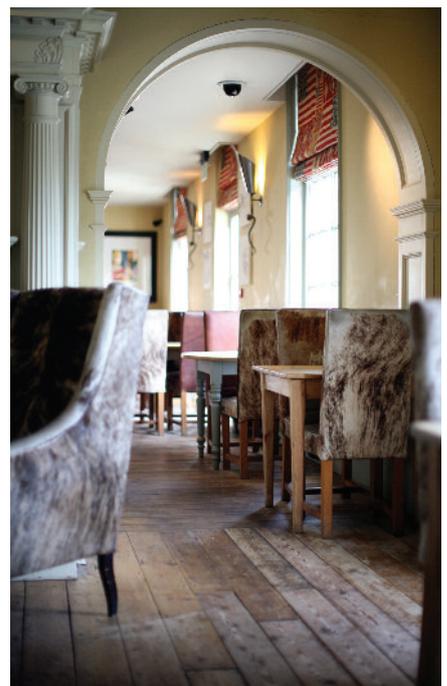
an opportunity to enjoy a cocktail in the bar or comfy lounge first – what a bonus! Of course the reality is that with all day dining (breakfast service is followed by brunch and then a full brasserie menu from noon to 9.30pm) and the addition of the sunny terrace as soon as the clocks change, I've yet to wait for a table.

And I particularly like this dining room – there's always a 'buzz'. Even at quieter times the open layout with view through to the kitchen (or 'Engine Room') gives us a window into a world that we don't always get to see, but one that Milsom's has the confidence to allow to shine.

I was tempted to start with a Kesgrave Sloejito while considering the menu... sloe gin with mint, lime and Sicilian lemonade... then reminded myself it was midweek! The starters were equally tempting – a very broad selection with around half a dozen of the choices available as 'generous' or main course sized portions if preferred – and one dish in particular leapt out at me; barbecue sweetheart cabbage, caraway, goats curd, radish and fine bean dressing. Yes, I'm a cabbage lover. Whether that's an extra helping of sprouts with my Christmas dinner, heaps of coleslaw, cauliflower or kale I love them all. And what a refreshing change to see this creative starter choice. The cabbage was sweet with just enough crunch and an expertly charred face. The mild goat's curd

made a perfect partner and I'd certainly choose this again; delicious.

My husband chose an altogether richer and more filling dish of smoked haddock fishcake, soft boiled egg, spinach, mussels and white wine cream. The latter part, on reflection, was surprisingly light but with intense flavours – another winner.





Mains were a more difficult choice. There's always an inviting selection of seafood and I found myself drawn to fish dish after fish dish; whole tandoori roasted bream, pan fried fillet of cod, butter roasted supreme of halibut to name a few but I eventually settled on pan fried chalk stream trout, roasted cauliflower risotto, mussels and samphire – yes, more from the cabbage family! The earthy, pink trout with its crispy skin teamed well with the soft, creamy risotto and the addition of the mussels and samphire added a further layer of deliciousness and texture with every mouthful.

Balancing the books for the meat lovers Adrian decided to try the smoked Dingley Dell pork burger with smoked apple wood cheddar, red onion, cos lettuce, gherkin and paprika mayonnaise in a caraway brioche bun and served with fries. Wow – not for the faint hearted, this is a burger that packs a punch! The smoked, herb infused pork is intensely flavoured and the caraway seeds in the brioche bun are a great twist on the traditional too. With more smokiness from the cheese too he were glad he'd chosen tomato and shallot salad as his optional side dish – a harmonious partnership.

It was time to consider dessert and for these we switched to the day's Specials menu. Across the table there was no holding back and a very broad smile as croissant and butter pudding served with run raisins and crème anglaise arrived. It was a generous portion, carefully layered and bursting with flavour I have a feeling there will be some croissant experimentation going on in our kitchen very soon.

I'd chosen a far lighter looking but equally indulgent pudding of blood orange panna cotta with orange jelly and chocolate ganache. Chocolate and orange is such a classic pairing and this feather light panna cotta with the rich chocolate ganache had me scraping my plate to the very last mouthful – the perfect end to a thoroughly enjoyable dinner.

What I'm really looking forward to now are the lighter evenings. The covered terrace at Kesgrave Hall, overlooking the sweeping lawns is possibly my most favourite spot for an early evening glass of fizz. Roll on the longer days and even more excuses to call in at Milsoms.

INFORMATION

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