

I'm beating a path back to rebooted Cotswolds gem soon

YOU really could be in the south of France," mused my mate, adjusting his sunglasses and taking another sip of ice-cold salmon-pink rosé.

In the dappled shade of the tranquil courtyard garden, a few inquisitive bees buzzed around the borders of swaying lilac lavender plants next to zinc-topped tables hot enough to fry eggs on in the midday sun.

On a balmy late June lunchtime, the garden at The Swan, in the picture-perfect, chocolate box Cotswold village of Ascott-under-Wychwood, certainly makes for a fine substitute for Provence despite its quintessential Englishness.

The pub's garden is made up of York stone, fire pits and painted wooden planters. There's also a wisteria-covered oak pergola and a Cotswold stone outdoor dining space. It really is a wonderful setting for an al fresco lunch.

Dating from the 16th century, the honey-stoned village inn itself ticks all the right boxes when it comes to bona fide Cotswold bolthole, with seven bedrooms and a family-size cottage in the garden as well as a bar/restaurant and separate oak-beamed feasting room with space for 18 diners.

The Swan reopened last month under Sam and Georgie Pearman, who were the co-founders of the hugely successful Lucky Onion hotel group before setting up their own Country Creatures group.

As well as The Swan, they also have The Chequers down the road in Churchill and a coaching inn and restaurant in North Yorkshire.

Mark Taylor visits a pub with star quality whether the local celeb set are there or not



Both The Swan and The Chequers are the local boozers of choice for the so-called Chipping Norton set, which means you might well bump into the likes of Cameron and Clarkson at any time.

The Swan is also 20 minutes from Soho Farmhouse and Daylesford Organic, making it an ideal pitstop for passing celebs as well as locals lucky enough to live in this highly desirable part of the Cotswolds.

The Pearmans have serious investors in Rupert Murdoch's daughter, Elisabeth, and her property developer husband Tony Gallagher, which goes some way in explaining the expensive refurbishment, which has retained the inglenook fireplaces and "mind your head" beams but furnished each public area to a high standard.

Head chef Adam Abbott was previously at The Wild Rabbit in nearby Kingham and his seasonal modern British menus are packed with local produce, whether you choose from the all-day bar menu or the à la carte. There's plenty of choice, too, with lots of salads and vegetable dishes, pies, sharing dishes, burgers and steaks.

We ordered from both menus,



> The 16th-century Swan in Ascott-under-Wychwood has been given a high-end refurb under new owners Sam and Georgie Pearman

Photo: Chris Terry

kicking off with chopped raw hanger steak (£9.50), which was a classic steak tartare in all but name.

The finely chopped steak had been generously seasoned, studded with capers and parsley and served with a dollop of fruity tomato dressing, croutons and nose-tingling fresh horseradish. A steak tartare aficionado, my mate said it was one of the best he's had.

Also excellent was a seemingly never-ending bowl of Dorset cockles (£12.50), the plump and briny molluscs immersed in a light, parsley-flecked broth of local cider enriched with cream.

From the bar menu, Ryeland lamb scrumpets (£7.50) – greaseless,

deep-fried strips of shredded, juicy lamb encased in crisp and crunchy breadcrumbs – turned up with a moreish herb mayonnaise, and a heap of lightly battered cod cheeks with cauliflower and squash pakoras (£13) were teamed with a funky green chutney.

A whole sea bream (£16) was precisely cooked on the bone and given the full-blown Mediterranean treatment with roasted red peppers, almonds and olives – an appropriately sunny plate of food for a sweltering al fresco lunch.

My mate finished with a tip-top board of six stinky British and French cheeses (£15) while I went for the gold top custard tart (£9) with its crisp pastry and wobbly filling, not to mention a fantastic rum and raisin ice cream.

After two hours in the sun ploughing through that lot and "rehydrating" with more wine, we paid up and waddled out of The Swan well fed and planning immediate return visits with our respective families and friends. Well, this gem of a rebooted Cotswold pub is simply too good not to share.

RATING 4/5

The Swan, 4 Shipton Road, Ascott-under-Wychwood, Chipping Norton, OX7 6AY. Tel: 01993 832332. www.swanascott.com

> The pub's courtyard garden and, right, the sea bream

Photos: Chris Terry



> Dorset cockles in cider

