

Great for grazing

Denise Barkley enjoys a delicious supper at The Fleece in Witney, which is making the most of its enviable location with a heritage-inspired revamp

With its prime position on Witney's picture-perfect Church Green, it's appropriate that The Fleece's recent revamp introduces a fresh new look with a nod to the town's heritage.

The judicious use of mirrors to open up the darker corners has worked wonders, and this busy pub had even more of its usual atmospheric buzz when we dropped in to take a look at the makeover and have a bite to eat from head chef Michael Halbert's summer menu.

With paintwork in sage green, greys and off-white, there's also a nod to the pub's idyllic location with a whimsical wallpaper featuring churches, fields and horses on the main wall of the bar. Appropriately, sheep feature large – on the backs of bar stools, as stuffed rams' heads on the walls, and with shepherds' crooks used as noticeboard rails. Seating has been reupholstered in an elegant tweed check, pepped up with geometric patterned cushions in toning cream, copper and green.

The Fleece is one of Oxford-based Peach Pubs' busiest hostelrys, especially in the summer months when customers can sit under parasols overlooking Church Green and drink in the pastoral scene along with their chosen tittle. The pub is one of Witney's oldest and back in the 1940s it was a favourite watering-hole of the poet Dylan Thomas, who lived nearby at South Leigh Manor.

At the helm is general manager Beccs Jones, who said: "We work hard to make our guests feel at home, and that was our inspiration in redecorating. We decided to emphasise The Fleece's classic Cotswolds character, to make the pub even more like a home from home, so that once you've settled in you just won't want to leave.

"We've added more armchairs upholstered in lovely English woollen fabrics in a nod to the town's blanket-making history as well as comfortable upholstered seats around the tables in the eatery, new booth seating, gorgeous wall coverings, original wood-cut engravings on the walls and some antique finds too."

We enjoyed an early supper, expecting the place to be fairly quiet at 6pm. We were wrong! Already most of the tables were occupied with people enjoying a well-earned post-work repast.

The summer menu echoed the warmer weather, with lots of light, fresh options. On a sunny evening we kicked off with equally summery drinks. I had a Grand Vodka – a mighty glass of premium Belvedere vodka and Fentimans tonic, topped off with plenty of ice and fresh lemon. It was so refreshing, and my husband Steve gave his classic Mojito the thumbs-up too.



I like chef Michael's salads, so started with the superfood one – it changes seasonally and this featured flakes of smoked mackerel, puy lentils, radish and spring onion, pepped up with a citrus dressing. Steve chose the Brixham crab cakes, crunchy morsels served with salad and a zingy chilli-infused mango salsa.

I stayed in fishy mode with roasted hake, perfectly cooked and temptingly presented on a bed of spinach with new potatoes and a buttery sauce dotted with tiny shrimps. It was yummy, and the perfect choice for me.

The Fleece serves great steaks – from award-winning butcher Aubrey Allen and dry-aged for 28 days to ensure the best flavour and tenderness. Steve's 8oz rump arrived cooked medium as requested, and served with chips, watercress and peppercorn sauce. If you want mushrooms, tomato and onion rings it costs another £3 – he did.

We rounded off a great meal with puds. A rich Valrhona chocolate and hazelnut mousse with home-made shortbread for hubbie, and an iced parfait for me. It was Black Forest style with candied cherries and chocolate and it was delicious.

The staff were as equally upbeat as the new surroundings, and dining at The Fleece is always fun. You will need to book because the word is already out that the place is better than ever. **LE**

• The Fleece, 11 Church Green, Witney OX28 4AZ, call 01993 892270, www.fleecewitney.co.uk

Talking Wine

with Ted Sandbach

Everyone seems obsessed with buying

online these days and I can see the advantages. However I recently spent a fair amount with a well-known clothes company, found half the stuff I bought did not fit, sent it all back but had to cover my own postage which cost a staggering £17! All a bit of a hassle and I would have been better off by going to one of their shops and talking to a real person, trying the clothes on and making an informed judgement.



However, with my online purchase came a wine voucher (apparently worth a staggering £50). This amount is, of course, the discounted amount off a £104 case meaning that I could have bought a case of 12 bottles of wine for £54 – £4.50 a bottle. Well, that is great value and is, of course, to lure you in, collect your data and the excuse to bombard you with constant offers and deals.

Friends have done this and they receive a real mix of wines some of which they enjoy and others that are generally poor. They cannot realistically send them back as, having come in single bottles, there are no wines of the same to return. Even if there were they probably would not bother as arranging collection and redelivery during a working day presents its own problems. I lose count of the number of times we have had to fight our way to the local post office collection point to retrieve a parcel that could safely have been left somewhere or with neighbours.

Which brings me to my point. It would be wiser to build a relationship with a local wine company – whichever one that might be! You just need to have the confidence to talk openly about your needs. Is it everyday wine you are after or is it necessary to buy a better wine for a special occasion? Do you prefer dry and fruity or rich and oaky?

All these questions need to be asked and advice taken – trust needs to be built but ultimately this puts you in a much stronger position than buying loosely through some cheap marketing gimmick that lands on your doorstep.

It seems that the apparent mystery of wine frightens people, yet wine is very simple and need not be at all complex. Forget the internet, forget the huge wine supermarkets, but instead support local companies and deal with real people selling real wine who actually care that your purchase fulfils your needs!

• Ted Sandbach, managing director of The Oxford Wine Company and the Oxford Wine Café