

## Restaurant review: Marina O'Loughlin visits Heritage, West Sussex

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"You'll be going to the Chequers," says the taxi driver who picks us up from Balcombe station. We will? "Oh yes," he's confident, "it's the only place in Slaugham. Used to be famous round these parts for having a four-poster bed." He's right, it turns out, but this handsome old pub, now renamed Heritage, is about to be famous for a lot more than just the chance to swank while you're sleeping.

Chef Matt Gillan has bought the place following a successful crowdfunding drive. Brave, I think, as we drive through sleepy hamlet after sleepy hamlet. Forget throbbing metropolis or even bustling village: this part of West Sussex has the air of life taking place elsewhere; passing trade is zero plus the odd stockbroker's Tesla. He's clearly banking on the hope that people will travel here, just for Heritage, just for him. It's a balls-of-steel move all round.

Look, I adore my job. The worst that happens is the odd furious barb on social media, mostly injured chefs or cravatted, cigar-toting chaps irate that someone else, a *woman*, has their dream gig. But heading to this kind of restaurant can keep me awake at night, the ones where life and soul and savings have been sunk into them. What if it's awful? Do I pretend it never happened, despite schlepping miles and paying loads to be there, unwilling to take the vast Sunday Times cudgel to a passion-driven indie?



From left: ceviche of scallop is “harmonious and perfectly judged” with salsify and coriander ice cream; ballotine of pork with mushroom farce and bacon jam — “astonishing” TOBY PHILLIPS PHOTOGRAPHY

Installed in the conservatory part of the restaurant with a view over fields and woods, cocktail in hand featuring “sumac-roasted red pepper tequila”, PX sherry and walnut (like breathing in intoxicating essence of autumn), plus pre-meal snacks of tiny jerusalem artichoke arancini with a lick of apple purée, and an inhalable baked potato velouté with various plays on onion, crisped and caramelised, I relax. We’re in safe hands. Actually, strike that, we’re not: we’re in inspired, creative and playful hands.

It’s been a circuitous Sussex route for Gillan to get here, via his Michelin star for the Pass at South Lodge hotel, and a few pop-ups and residencies in the likes of Brighton and Horsham. Ambition seeps through every page of the menus: gently priced set lunch (three courses for £27) through à la carte to full seven-course tasting, regular or vegetarian. That inevitable chef law is in evidence — to wit, if you’ve been on Great British Menu, everyone must know you’ve been on Great British Menu. A whole page is dedicated to “the Herder”, his winning goat’s meat number.

Fair enough: I’m not about to knock ambition and the dishes deliver hit after hit. Even things I read as being potential misfires — coriander ice cream on delicate marinated raw scallops — are harmonious and perfectly judged, the shouty herb muted by its freezing, toasted pumpkin seeds and mandolined salsify adding crunch. In one astonishing course, pork skin — wrapped around a mushy farce and served with bacon jam and roasted plum — has been treated so it almost feels like suet pudding pastry, teeth sinking into its sticky depths.

Some are deliciously head-scratching: the pungent glaze on monkfish with almost charred white cabbage and kohlrabi is Chinese-style XO sauce, tasting house-made. There's a puddle of seductive, perfumed oil cradled in the silken celeriac purée that comes with venison loin. (Seasonality is a big deal here, without a big deal being made of it.) It's chicory caramel: ravishing. As are the tiny bursts of richness from cocoa nibs in the slick of sauce. Even the cheese course brings surprises, a slender, flaky apple turnover in among shards of homemade crackers; cantal or Cherwell goat's cheese slathered on top has eyes rolling back in heads with pleasure.

Being ultra-critical (it's my job, babez), the place is a little ... antiseptic, more like a branch of a new-build hotel's Marco Pierre White fleecerie than somewhere with decades of history: wipe-clean tables, blown-up photographic kitchen scenes, senior staff in severe, hey-there-Mr Michelin suiting. Only tree-branch wallpaper and the fragrance of woodsmoke add atmosphere. Oh, and an "Ambassador Wall" plaque on the way to the loos, etched with the names of crowdfunding supporters. The cooking, while pretty much flawless in execution, is a teeny bit dated, all microherbs, microplaned radishes and textural touches delivered via the dreaded maltodextrin, turning up in two dishes: snowed over that pork — which really should have been left to its own butch devices; and a dessert of chocolate sorbet with damsons. Like a beautiful woman stuck in the style of her glory years, it feels a bit 2014, when Gillan still held his Michelin star.

Neighbouring tables, populated by the kind of people who'd voluntarily describe themselves as "foodies", are loving it. (The bellowing, no doubt God-tier ShitAdvisor contributor next to us, who monopolises the ever-patient staff and keeps referring to his beautiful colleague as "my wife" when she's out of earshot, is why I could never be a restaurateur.) Staff are uniformly lovely; chefs who look about 12 bring dishes to the table; one tells us he was determined to work with Gillan after seeing him on TV: "My dad called me over," he tells us, "saying, 'You'll love this.' And I did. And here I am." Even this here stony heart is touched.

I'd love Gillan to ditch the tweezers and the polysaccharides and relax into his new home, letting his talent and the wonderful produce do the talking; each dish features a dizzying waltz of ingredients and techniques. But people do like a bit of TV showmanship for their loot. Bedrooms are in the pipeline, turning Heritage into its own destination. And it is, absolutely, destination-worthy, without any doubt. I can even recommend a taxi company.

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## What they ate

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- **Tasting menu** Scallop, coriander; Jerusalem artichoke; Ballotine of pork; Coal-finished monkfish; Venison loin; Chocolate sorbet, damsons; Caramel cheesecake *£65 per person for seven courses; £15 supplement for Cheeses, crackers and apple turnover*

- **Drinks** 2016 Bertani Soave Vintage Edition £48
- **Total** For two (without service charge) **£193**

*Heritage, the Chequers, Slaughtam, West Sussex RH17 6AQ; 01444 401102, [heritage.restaurant](http://heritage.restaurant)*