

Away from the rush, the food's the thing at Ludlow's luxurious Fishmore Hall, writes **Richard McComb**

A rural recipe for excellence

I don't know how she does it because Laura Penman, the owner/director of Fishmore Hall, looks barely out of college. In a little over two years, she has turned a dilapidated former girls' school into a pristine, rather cool, hotel on the rural fringe of that living, breathing gastropod that is Ludlow.

Penman has been rewarded for her efforts with an Acorn Award by *Caterer* magazine, previous winners of which include Marco Pierre White and Marcus Wareing, so it's not to be sniffed at. Just down the road at La Becasse restaurant, head chef Will Holland was named with Penman among the top 30 figures in the nation's hospitality trade aged under 30.

Such industry recognition bodes well for the culinary future of the Shropshire town, which, unusually, has been in the shadow of Birmingham since the city achieved three one-star Michelin restaurant listings back in January. However, the bestowing of the Acorns, and a visit to Fishmore Hall just a few weeks ago, confirms that reports of Ludlow's demise have been greatly exaggerated.

Fishmore's grand classic white exterior proves that the Georgians still take some beating when it comes to architectural aesthetics. The hotel opened in October 2007 following a 22-week refurbishment. It is marketed as a "boutique" hotel, a label it doesn't really need, what with its associations with new money and Premier League footballers.

Fishmore is, in fact, a reassuringly traditional English hotel that happens to have some sleek, modern interiors and a commendably unstuffy ambience. Some hotels claim to be "get-away-from-it-all," offering comfort and relaxation; Fishmore just does it, without pretension, serving as an ideal spot for a weekend away from the rush-rush-rush of Birmingham and the 'burbs.

The hotel has 15 bedrooms and, as we were on a family visit with our two daughters, we took up the offer of Room One, which is a ground-floor set up to the side of the main house. It has its own entrance and is perfect for disabled access, should that be a consideration for your party. The sitting area converts to two singles - with its own plasma television - and a whopping great double is just round the corner for parents seeking a spot of privacy. There is something about hotel beds that cries out to be laid on, immediately, so we did, and jolly comfortable it was.

The suite has a great wet room, about the size of a semi-detached house. You can sluice away to your heart's content inside the water-tight, coffee-chocolate sanctuary. But don't stay in there too long, because you'll look like a prune and miss the main event at Fishmore: which is the terrific food.

The restaurant was awarded two AA rosettes within days of opening in 2007. I can't vouch for it then, as this was my first visit, but the kitchen is now under the command of David Jaram and I can't help but think that greater glory may lie ahead if he continues to up its game. The standard of cooking



Head chef David Jaram is attracting growing interest for his fine dining at Fishmore Hall, Ludlow, Shropshire.

and the faultless selection of fine local produce, picked for its quality and not just as a gimmick, hints at Jaram's dedication as well as the admirable willingness of Penman to back him to the hilt. This isn't always the case in the blinkered hotel industry but Penman is taking the long view, on which reputations, not quick bucks, are made. It's an admirable policy.

Aperitifs are served in the sitting room (warning: if you get into one of the armchairs, you won't want to get out) or in the bar, from where I cast jealous glances at the beautiful wooden floor. Canapes are always a good indication of events to follow and these were very good - smoked salmon, just-right boiled quails eggs, fluffy balls of goats cheese, oniony light breads.

The dining room is big on white, which has a double benefit - you can't go wrong with it and it acts as a splendid backdrop to the views of Brown Clee

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Hill and the rich pasture land of this beautiful part of Britain. Menu options include a £55 six-course Taste of the Marches spectacular, which can be taken with a complementing wine selection for an extra £29.50 per person. There is a pick-and-mix market menu, which is keenly priced for food this good and the three-course *a la carte* is £46.50, which is the one we went for.

Proceedings kicked off with a glug of celeriac and cep froth, which was delectable. For starters, a top terrine was my terrain, a good ham hock with Madeira, celeriac remoulade and pea bavarois - meat and two veg, dressed up in their finery. The Cornish crab and coriander salad, avocado, lime confit, yoghurt and caviar was selling like hot cakes (crab cakes?) and a foray with a spoon among my fellow diners revealed why.

For mains, my Bakewell Farm duck breast was good, of a pleasant pinkness, accompanied with a



The elegant Georgian exterior of the award-winning Fishmore Hall and, below, one of the luxury bedrooms



well flavoured confit leg, pomme maxime and chicory. The slow roast chump of lamb, a criminally under-used cut, was equally good, served with gnocchi, sautéed sweetbread and confit shallot.

The artisan cheeses are a must, especially with a good bottle of claret to finish, so that's what I did. I usually start

to cry when restaurants serve unnecessary bits with cheese but Fishmore's fig and almond cake, quince jelly and homemade biccies were fab. Dessert-eaters loved the strawberry soufflé (with tarragon, yoghurt sorbet and honeycomb) and a playful, invigorating combination of apple and vanilla flavours.

Breakfast is excellent, too. Go for the porridge with brown sugar (whisky optional) and the eggs Benedict.

■ Fishmore is running packages to mark the Ludlow food festival - three nights' accommodation for Friday-Sunday with one evening meal for £500. For more information, go to www.fishmorehall.co.uk



Head Chef Will Holland at the Michelin starred restaurant La Becasse.

A star is rising in gourmet's galaxy

THE PLACE

La Becasse, 17 Corve Street, Ludlow, Shropshire. T: 01584 872 325

WHY GO

Based on the fact that this is nearly in Wales, La Becasse is a *bona fide* destination restaurant but the four-day car journey from Birmingham is well rewarded.

Will Holland is running his own Michelin-star kitchen at the age of 29. Claude Bosi picked up two stars at the same pitch in Corve Street - then known as Hibiscus - before upping sticks for London. Holland could emulate the Gallic gourmand.

THE PRICE

The bullet-proof three course *a la carte* is £55 (you're also likely to get a chef's appetizer and a pre-dessert). You can opt for two courses for £49, but you'd have to be potty. The epic *menu gourmand* is only a fiver more than the full *a la carte* at £60.

As you will have had to change the tyres on your Range Rover to get out here, an additional tenner for two to go gourmand isn't worth a second thought. That said, the *menu du jour* offers enjoyment and value.

Three courses (with a couple of shot glasses of fun tasters) works out at £26. It's just the ticket for a top-class munch in the country, an affordable family splurge or a discreet liaison you might slip through on expenses.

THE MEAL

Courses on the *menu du jour* come in triplicate - three starters, three mains, three desserts. What's the problem with chefs who offer endless options of mediocrity? They're a menace. Holland isn't, especially if you don't quote him, which I don't. The day before our visit, he was on the BBC's *Saturday Kitchen*. He got through an entire show without upsetting anybody, which is remarkable.

So to the starters: asparagus mousse came with a confit pullet egg yolk and a summer truffle dressing while the tomato gazpacho "La Becasse style" looked ravishing, el soupo shot through with a pure distillation of the fruit. I had the jellied pig's head terrine because, well, you've just got

to. Like all the dishes, it was perfect, cool, light with a zing injection courtesy of a sauce gribiche and caper berries.

My main course of Moroccan spiced lamb farced with couscous had lovely flavours, the rich meat offset by a tomato, coriander and chickpea salsa and divine smoked aubergine.

Our girls both went for the pan-fried sea trout fillet. Polly, the eldest, declared it the best main course she'd eaten. The trout came with puy lentils, apple puree and a curried veloute that offered total sensory satisfaction.

After giving La Becasse the big sell to Sally, her main course was a solitary blip on a grand occasion. The chargrilled chicken ballotine was with a strawberry and tarragon jus. The constituent parts were good, but made awkward bedfellows.

A pre-dessert featured elderflower and gooseberries. The latter is the only thing I cannot eat. I am told it was lovely, by Livvy, to whom I passed my glass. Traumatized, I had the excellent cheese. The party cleaned up with peach melba - thyme poached with raspberries, meringue and vanilla ice cream. Later, Holland gave me a scoop of his iced strawberry parfait with Pimms jelly and sweet cucumber foam. I should have had it. Divine.

THE VERDICT

Exemplary cooking, superb value. If Holland doesn't get a second Michelin star, I'll eat my gooseberries.

RATING: ★★★★★

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