

HIGHCLIFF GRILL NEWS ROOM

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The Highcliff Grill

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I have a soft spot for the Highcliff because my parents spent a week there every autumn for years in the 'sixties and 'seventies and were very fond of it. Its history began in 1873 when a terrace of four large houses was built on the West Cliff but within a year was being run as a hotel called Highcliffe Mansions, and a hotel it has been ever since. It had the misfortune to be one of the chief examples of the dreadful mismanagement that brought down county brewers Eldridge Pope in the 1990s: they bought it for £4.36 million pounds and sold their remaining 50% stake ten years later for £620,000. Since 2006 it has been fully managed by the Marriott chain, who have recently finished a complete refurbishment.

One of the elements in that refurbishment was the re-naming of the restaurant as the Highcliff Grill. To judge by our experience, it is maintaining the standards of luxury and quality that have always been associated with the Highcliff. You get the best possible first impression as you sit in the bar, looking through the large windows at the view across Poole Bay to the Needles. We were also impressed by the fact that Mrs Freddie's dry sherry arrived already chilled, which is as it should be but often isn't.

From the nine starters on the menu, which changes every six months, Mrs Freddie chose spiced squid on black pudding. It sounded to me like a most questionable combination, but the result proved me wrong according to Mrs Freddie, who thinks that black pudding is underrated, especially in its versatility. In fact, without the oomph of the black pudding, she said, it might have been rather bland, despite the coriander and pomegranate salad and lime mayonnaise; the latter, along with the black pudding, was for her the making of the dish.

I'm never sure what a 'signature dish' is, except one that the chef is particularly proud of. That for me was recommendation enough for the fish soup, which proved quite a mystery. I had to call in Mrs Freddie's expertise and we thought perhaps lobster and a slug of sherry were the main ingredients. When Head Chef Clyde Hollett joined us later, it turned out that we could not have been more wrong: the main (unguessable, we told ourselves) ingredients were conger eel, mackerel, red wine, Pernod and saffron. But it had been a fun exercise, as well as being extremely delicious, not least because of the accompaniment of thinly grated gruyere cheese, wafer-like croutons and a rouille, that is a sort of mayonnaise with tabasco.

For the main course there is a choice of five fish and four non-fish dishes, plus grills, including chicken and salmon. 'This is ridiculous' was Mrs Freddie's reaction to her main course of best end of lamb. What she meant was that it was ridiculous for any meat to be so tender. The dish was



a witty take on the old favourite of lamb, peas and carrots because with the meat came croquettes of pea and potato and a purée of carrot and cardamom. I had chosen fillets of Megrim sole (that's sole from Cornwall), which were soft in both taste and texture but accompanied by crunchy samphire whose salty taste provided the savour. The trap with samphire – and one that surprisingly was not entirely avoided in this case – is that each stalk has a woody part which is inedible but which is difficult to identify and extract. The dish included creamed potato, which I used to mop up every last drop of the excellent and creamy saffron fish sauce.

There is a choice of five puddings, plus cheese. My pudding came in three parts: a strawberry delicie, like a mousse but with a thin biscuit beneath and a thin jelly on top, peppered strawberries (I don't know who on earth thought of that unlikely combination, but it works) and, best of all, champagne granita which was one of the highlights of the meal. Mrs Freddie was a little disappointed in her lemon posset because she had expected the cream to be lighter and more lemony, but the hazelnut shortbread with it had a good flavour.

The wine list is sensibly divided into headings like 'deep rich whites' and 'light fruity reds'. Despite Mrs Freddie's request for something from the smooth and spicy section – I think she was talking about the wine – we drank a light fruity Munro Pinot Noir from Italy. It had a good dry flavour, even to the point of being slightly sharp.

A three-course meal at the Highcliff Grill is likely to produce a bill of a little over £30 on average. It's towards the expensive end of the price range, but that's because what you're paying for is towards the top end of the quality range.