

# Eating out

## Giles Coren

‘The Dexter meatballs were awesome. Happily swap you one of the kids for another bowlful’

### The Wheatsheaf, Gloucestershire

**M**y ridiculous friends Miles and Hester have bought a place in the Cotswolds. They’re Londoners, born and bred. Your basic urban media folk from those strip cartoons in *Private Eye*. And suddenly one morning they’ve woken up and gone, “Ooh, la, what we need is a stone rectory in its own formal gardens within spitting distance of Daylesford.”

Except they couldn’t afford that, so they’ve bought a converted barn in the middle of a muddy field, up a dirt track, surrounded by big arable where it is true you can spit at Daylesford, but you have to drive 45 minutes first. And it still cost them upwards of \*raucousthroatclear\* pounds, which they had to borrow at rates which look okay now, but if the base goes up a couple of spots any time in the next 40 years will have them hanging themselves from the large ash tree at the top of the drive (which looks to me as if it has dieback).

Still, being the Cotswolds, there are at least

dozens of brilliant pubs to go to these days. All those rundown 18th-century coaching inns lately turned to Tobias Smollett-themed boutique hostelries, with new local ales, wonderful produce from the farms thereabouts, and hot young chefs cooking

wonderful modern dishes in a friendly, relaxed way, unharried by the pressure-cooker atmosphere of the capital.

Except – whoops! – in the four months they’ve had the place, Miles and Hester have not once been able to get out for a meal. Because when they made their brilliant plan to escape the Smoke, they forgot about their children, Kit and Samantha, who are still toddlers and thus cannot be left alone at night nor taken to the pub for lunch, on account of missing their naps. And so deep in the boonies is this barn of theirs that no baby-sitter can be found for love nor mangelwurzels.

They haven’t even been for a walk yet. Literally not so much as a stroll. Because the kids can’t walk more than a few hundred yards without moaning to go home and are too big to carry. They bought an off-road buggy but it doesn’t go very far off the road and the children only argue about who gets to go in it. So at best Miles or Hester can get out

alone for a walk while the other one minds the kids. But that isn't much fun. So they just stay home, trying to make the Sky box work with very limited broadband. Miles went for a run once, but got lost in a cow field (is that a thing, a "cow field"?) and had to phone Hester to come and get him. But she couldn't because Kit was napping.

They can't even go to antiques shops together to buy stuff to furnish this barn of theirs, which was the main reason they bought it in the first place. So they go separately and come back with things about which the other

one tries to be nice, but says they don't think is right for the living room although it will be splendid in the spare bedroom. So what they have is a spare bedroom crammed with *objets* that one of them hates, and not a stick of furniture anywhere else.

There is a guest cottage, but it needed renovating and six different sets of builders have failed to show up on the day work was meant to start (there are no Poles out there, so it is impossible to get anything built), which means that nobody can come to stay with them, the spare room in the main barn being, as I mentioned, so chock-full of naff antiques that they cannot open the door.

But they are very good friends of ours, Miles and Hester, so we do occasionally visit them and kip on the sofa, just to be supportive. And because they have not yet worked out how to use the Aga, which is their only means of presenting fire to raw food, we have taken it upon ourselves to investigate the local pub restaurant scene alone, leaving them to their sandwiches and cold tinned soups. And one of the best we have found so far is called the Wheatsheaf, in the village of Northleach.

It's about ten minutes' drive from Miles and Hester, down lovely tight little overgrown lanes, with thousands of tiny eyes winking at you from deep in the trees, and some from the tyre-marked faces of hares and badgers in the middle of the road. We parked up in its car park and walked down through pretty gardens into a strange little room with men cooking in it. This was the kitchen. But they kindly

directed us out and round and in through a small bar to a big, low-ceilinged dining room hung with rather serious-looking unframed Thirties-style oil portraits and positively rammed to the gills with serious local scoffers. It's damned near impossible to get a table at

the Wheatsheaf at short notice, but Miles is a bigwig in the food industry, so throwing his name about got us a plum spot in the corner.

The atmosphere is terrific. Ruddy, jocund, very English. Not like some of the Notting-Hill-on-the-Wold type places hereabouts. The staff are youngish, local, enthusiastic and without warts or lesions. The guests a bit older, equally local and enthusiastic, slightly more warts. And everyone was having a whale of a time.

I threw down a couple of pints of a nice chewy ale called Tabby made by some young alumnus of Hook Norton, but Esther was served a manzanilla so brown I leapt to my London feet and loudly accused these bumpkins of accidentally serving her a palo cortado or dry oloroso or something. Silly me. It was an unfiltered manzanilla "En Rama" – the most fashionable wine in the world.

The menu was big, long, fruity. Maybe 40 dishes including "On toast", "Seafood" and "Grill" as well as starters and mains. I used to be very snobby about long rural menus covering everything from thai green curry and traditional fish'n'chips to dim sum, chicken tikka and toad-in-the-hole, because they had to cater for locals who had nowhere else to go and wanted a bit of exotic when they put on clean underpants and a bow tie.

But competition round here is stiff and these were sound British platefuls, modernised and elaborated but very much in keeping with the history of the place and the area.

They were very keen on some asparagus from the Wye Valley just in (this was late March), which appeared in a salad with peas and broad beans on the night before the clocks went forward, so felt rather like vegetables from the future. They were rude, squeaky and sweet rather than robust and ferrous as they will be by the time you read this, but forgiven everything for their newness and youth. There were marinated mackerel fillets on sourdough toast with zippy tomato flavours and a good carpaccio of some breed of beef whose name now escapes me.

Best of the starters was the venison liver advertised as "seared" but rather more cooked than that, with crispy parma ham and a proper old-fashioned red wine reduction. I think a deer's organs can take a bit of cooking, as it happens, and I loved it. As I did the venison pie, despite a crust whose firmness rather reminded me of its medieval ancestor, the "coffin pie", which was designed

to last for many weeks in a world without refrigeration. But the braise inside was rich and chocolatey and you do need pretty tough pastry to stand a thing like that up on the plate without seepage.

Esther had a steak. Yawn. So I pulled in a roasted lemon sole with new potatoes that was perfectly gleaming: hot, fresh and woody, lifted by zippy lemon and caper butter. And because I am incapable of not ordering spaghetti and meatballs if I see any variant of it on a menu, I yodelled for the handmade pappardelle with slow-cooked Dexter meatballs. Awesome. Lovely firm ribbons of pasta, big thick balls of beef, nicely browned, rich tomato sauce. Happily swap you my car and one of the kids for another bowlful.

Desserts were up and down. The poached pears in red wine were a bit feeble and the Marathon pudding, a chocolate fondant made out of Snickers bars, was more of a girl thing than I'm into, but the lemon suet pudding was nailed-on historic.

All of these dishes (apart from the mackerel) were contrived by me to go well with a thumping bottle of Château Musar from their very grown-up list, and did so magnificently. Which is why I let Esther drive us back to Miles and Hester's to tell them, gleefully, all about it. ■



**The Wheatsheaf**

Northleach,  
Gloucestershire (01451  
860244; cotswolds  
wheatsheaf.com)

**Cooking:** 7

**Service:** 8

**Location:** 9

**Score:** 8

**Price:** £100 for two  
if you're not stupid  
with the wine, which  
I usually am.



SIMON JESSOP