

There may be good reasons to eat at The Restaurant at Cowley Manor, although perhaps its name – The Restaurant – isn't one of them. "I'm going to The Bar before The Restaurant, darling, and then I'll see you in The Bedroom". "All right, but can we just finish parking in The Car Park first?"

The Elder Daughter and I arrive an hour late – after driving into several hedges. The satnav doesn't like the idea of going there and keeps ordering us imperiously to "perform a U-turn when possible" on roads the size of my little finger. When we get mobile reception – which isn't often – we call to say we're running late. Which might be as good a way as any to alert the staff to our table reservation. Wrong.

Cowley Manor is an Italianate 19th century pile ten minutes from Cheltenham. The house was once Council offices/Brownie camp before Peter and Jessica (née Sainsbury) Frankopan turned it into a 30-bedroom grown-up playground cum rural bolthole for urban professionals. It has a corporate feel despite its being retro modern and boasting quirky details such as papier-mâché animal heads smoking – a spoof on hunting trophies – and cow hide seats.

I'm keen to see the bedrooms as I'm not staying here. The receptionist says there's no problem in delaying our table as the restaurant is far from busy – it transpires that they don't even have a reservation for us – and he takes us cheerily around Good, Better, Exceptional and Best rooms. 'Peter Frankopan,' he fizzles, as I admire the bath tubs, 'is a Crown Prince of Croatia and lecturer in Byzantine Art at Oxford.' But the Grade II-listed gardens are the real selling point. And the C-Side spa – an attractive Modernist style building.

Before dinner, we drink Virgin Marys in a lounge of kindergarten colours overlooking a Lewis-Carroll-inspiring 55 acres of park, woodland and meadows with natural springs, lakes and Victorian cascades. (Apparently he dreamt up Alice in Wonderland here.) The view over the terrace is unbeatable.

The restaurant – I mean The Restaurant – overlooks it too and has a spectacular, mega-high ceiling painted fuschia (curiouser and curiouser), original oak-panelled walls, traffic-cone-style hanging lampshades and linen table cloths – all redolent of the House of Commons dining room during a committee on road safety, but with sultry background music.

The first thing to know about the menu is that it tries to be hip. A dish comes w (not with – and the folks at Cowley underline the 'w', maybe for emphasis?) sea herbs or whatever. It's modern British. Liam Parr is the newly appointed chef. (Matthew Cuthbert – ex Heston and Marco – is the newly departed chef.) I'd like 'rib of beef roasted in hay for two w chips'. But it turns out that it's not hay for two, but beef – and my daughter's being vegetarian this week.

She orders shellfish minestrone which is more a broth i.e. thin and w rather tasteless fish and gloops of aioli on toast. I have glazed Dorset crab which is good, but mixed w too many Jersey royals, rather like potato salad w a little crab. (In fact we could have alleviated the Irish Potato Famine as my daughter has potato cake w her main course and, stupidly, we order a side of triple fried chips, supplementing my rösti. The chips are very dry – quadruple or even octo fried perhaps? – and the rösti so salty it's inedible.)

As for mains, Elder Daughter's halibut is good. And what of my grilled rump of beef? I've had meat that has been better hung, less bright red and less chewy; but the beef shin sauce is superb: rich and with depth. The creamed peas and braised baby gem combo doesn't work. Then my offspring has a tarte tartin that could be crispier.

The clientele are men in pink check shirts and women in white silk ones, fortysomethings talking about corporate video making. The staff are charming and friendly, but straight off the pages of Alice in Wonderland. Me: "Do you recommend the halibut?" Waitress: "Yes, because I like mussels." (The halibut is actually served w potato cake, leek and capers.) And, Waiter: "You should taste the parlaine (praline, that is) parfait." "OK, I'll have that." Him: "But it was on last week's menu." When I order rosewater panna cotta, instead said Waiter brings me lemon posset – which is actually delicious, like a slightly sweetened, citrusy crème brûlée.

The bill is a not inconsequential £105 for two, with no alcohol. I am not sure I would go again. But the one thing I adore are the loos – in the former kitchens of this stately home, complete with original glass atrium roof and tiled walls and with a Modernist wood-shingle-clad pod for the lavs themselves. And the other tick goes to the gardens. As for The Restaurant, it offers average to good home-cooking, depending on the home. And the portions are generous. It makes for a pleasant summer evening in a splendid garden with a country house hotel attached.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist based in London

Photographs courtesy of Cowley Manor – Photographer Amy Murrell

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	Reviewer's Rating	★★★★★
	Cuisine	British
	Need to book	Advisable
	Clientele	Fortysomethings, couples, families, business people
	Restaurant good for	Couples, Families with children, Doing business, Scenic view
	Cost per head	Medium
	Dress Code	Smart Casual
	Dining Options	Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner

**Additional Price Comments**

Starters from £7; Mains from £17; Desserts from £7. Expect to pay around £52 per person without alcohol and service.

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