

AN INSPECTOR CALLS



A CONFESSION: Brand Gordon Ramsay tends to give me indigestion. The man is everywhere. It's too much. Yes, I know he's got a big business to run and a huge ego to feed, but his appetite for self-promotion makes Sir Richard Branson look like a shrinking violet. So there's not much of a spring in my step on arrival at York & Albany, the big fella's first ever hotel, near London Zoo.

But hold on a minute. From the outside, it's a mighty handsome building (a John Nash gem circa 1826) and things are even more impressive inside, with an original stone floor (brought up from the basement), muted colours and hand-picked antique furniture. And that's just the reception area.

Our room, reached by a magnificent Georgian stairway, is grand but not stuffy — and utterly charming. The clever hand of designer Russell Sage is much in evidence, with a Gainsborough silk-covered bedhead, reclaimed timber floor, textured beige wallpaper, matt paint finishes,

shutters (no curtains), fabulous ceiling rose, proper cornices, free-standing roll-top bath.

'I could happily live here,' says my wife. And by the time we go downstairs and start perusing the menu, I'm pretty much agreeing with her.

The wonderful Angela Hartnett is directing operations in the kitchen, working alongside head chef Colin Buchan. Her Italian-accented modern European repertoire is out of this world. We want to eat the entire menu but, pushed to make a decision, opt for swordfish carpaccio with chilli and pickled fennel; smoked duck salad with charred leeks and grated hazelnut, followed respectively by oven-baked halibut with chorizo and white beans, and fish stew with piperade, fennel and parsley. Sounds tempting, doesn't it? And tastes *sensational*.

There's a small courtyard outside, lit sensitively and furnished with pots of olive and bay trees. Staff are smartly-dressed and remarkably well-briefed given that the place



Better by design:
Ramsay's
new hotel

opened only on Monday. Wines are reasonably priced — starting at £4 for a glass, £16.50 for a bottle. And there's a third option in the form of 50cl carafes. Come to think of it, the food is a steal, too, given the quality, with starters from £6- £9 and main courses £14-£22. Shortly after ordering, a little cheese board arrives bearing a pickling jar filled with warm chicken liver and fole gras pate and melba toast. We begin by spreading this glorious concoction on the toast and end up dipping into it as you do a tub of supermarket humous.

There are only ten bedrooms. Ours is on the first floor and is noisy in the morning if you have the window open. On the way to breakfast, I spot Hartnett having coffee with a man who turns out to be the hotel manager, James Partridge (formerly of Claridge's). He wants to know what I make of it all. He's particularly concerned about light filtering through the shutters uninvited. I tell him the

shutters are perfect as they are, but he scribbles something down in his book anyway.

Breakfast is a smidgeon chaotic. There's lots of rushing around, but not much comes in my direction. Instead, minds seem concentrated on the dell opening for business next door in what used to be the stables. I should join the stampede and pick up some of that pate but, instead, I stick around for a late-arriving yet perfectly delicious omelette with herbs and baked tomatoes. Ramsay says he knows hotel critics will give his latest start-up a 'rough ride' and will say 'stick to what you know'. On the contrary. He should roll out (dreaded Ramsay phrase) several more of these ventures. This is in a class of its own.

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