

Dales Life

SKIPTON AND WHARFE VALLEY EDITION

FREE

Rock On

THE ART OF MAKING ROCKING HORSES

Go Sloe

MAKE YOUR OWN HEDGEROW LIQUEUR

Sleeping Beauties

THE ELUSIVE DORMOUSE IS BACK IN THE DALES

Home Comforts

COSY AUTUMN RECIPES BY JAMES MARTIN



top table

*Liz Hanson visits
Prime at Stirk House Hotel, Gisburn*





Set in the heart of the Ribble Valley near Gisburn, on the Yorkshire-Lancashire border, Stirk House is a gorgeous 17th century manor house standing in 22 acres of gardens, meadows and woodland.

Built with honey-coloured stone from the remains of a former local abbey, Stirk House first became a hotel in the 1930s. It survived a near-devastating fire to become a popular spot for extravagant wedding receptions in the 1950s. Recently refurbished, with a spa and 33 luxurious rooms, it's now a well-appointed conference and wedding venue, and a convenient base for exploring Ribblesdale on foot or by bicycle.

Fat Crab

Stirk House's restaurant, Prime, has a tranquil elegance in keeping with the building's delightful period frontage. A magnificent mirrored fireplace, candlelit tables and a tastefully understated colour scheme strike a neat balance between classic and contemporary. We got a warm welcome, and were immediately impressed by a general air of smart, relaxed efficiency. The dining room was bustling, even though it was a weekday night; clearly Prime is a popular place.

We were pleased to find a decent selection of plausible options on the menu, which majored on modern British classics. Having arrived and ordered at the same time as a large group we resigned ourselves to a lengthy wait and settled down with a couple of glasses of Merlot. As it happened, however, our starters arrived commendably promptly.

Both were immaculately displayed on smart, black, rectangular plates, like miniature works of modern art. My starter, crab and Greenland prawn salad with tomato and avocado, was fresh, cool and delicious. The rich marine flavours of the seafood were set off nicely by the crispness of the salad leaves and the soft, unctuous avocado, with a coriander garnish adding extra pep.

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My dining companion, Wayne, had opted for boneless roast chicken thighs infused with lemon, garlic and thyme, and served with a fruity curry sauce. The three hunks of chicken were tender, tasty, and moist, and the pert yellow curry sauce made an excellent dip. We couldn't help feeling that the dish needed something else to give it a lift, though – a few more salad leaves, perhaps, or a dusting of fresh green herbs.

For my main I decided to indulge myself in a ribeye steak. Steaks at Prime are served with slow-roast tomato, Portobello mushroom, triple-cooked chips and watercress – although in the interests of staying slim for my forthcoming holiday I heroically shunned the potatoes in favour of a salad.

Sundae Best

Like our starters, my steak arrived on a rectangular platter, cooked medium as requested. I was provided with a seriously sharp, state-of-the-art steak knife, although to be honest the meat was so tender and moist that I could have sliced it with a lollipop stick. We had also ordered a side of onion rings, and these were generously proportioned, crisp and succulent – definitely up there with the best onion rings I have ever had, so full marks there!

Wayne chose beef brisket and real ale pie as his main. This too was nicely presented, in this instance on a round, white plate. The filling was rich and deeply savoury, and the homemade pastry was as light and fluffy as could be. Accompaniments included a chunk of smoky chargrilled courgette, parsnip, a miniature beetroot, a floret of broccoli and mashed potato. Whilst that might sound like quite a daunting plateful, portion sizes throughout were actually quite moderate. To my mind, that's a good thing; nobody wants starters and mains so huge that they can't find room for a dessert.

When dessert time arrived I decided it was high time to stop counting calories. We ordered a sticky toffee pudding sundae and a strawberry shortbread trifle. We were jolly glad that we did, too, because they provided a suitably splendid finale to the evening.

The strawberry trifle struck a nice balance between sweet and fruity. It consisted of a jelly base, topped with homemade shortbread crumbs, thick cream and luscious sliced strawberries. The sticky toffee pudding was a winsome combination of toffee, syrup, cream and ice-cream, so another big thumbs-up there!

By the time we had polished off the desserts we were full to the brim. Not so full, though, that we couldn't pop out onto the terrace to enjoy the unseasonably warm air, the floodlighting and the remains of our drinks – a perfect end to a thoroughly indulgent evening.

For further information about Prime visit primeatstirkhouse.co.uk or call 01200 445581.



What to expect

An upmarket take on hearty British grub.

Ambience

Smartly refurbished country house hotel.

Service

Cleverly choreographed and super-efficient.

The bottom line

Three courses each for the two of us cost a total of £64, excluding drinks.

Down the hatch

A decent selection of wines, with wines by the glass starting at £4.25 (125ml).

More to explore

If you decide to stay over, check out the stunning Norman stained-glass windows in Gisburn church, or visit Gisburn Forest, the largest forest in Lancashire and home to one of the country's top mountain-biking trails. Nearby Clitheroe is a lovely old market town with a castle recently hailed as 'Best Small Visitor Attraction of the Year'.