

The Milk House, Sissinghurst *where the pastures always greener*

The once forlorn and faded Bull Inn, a 16th-century pub and coaching inn, closed its doors and for two years waited to be rescued. In 2013 Sarah and New Zealand-born chef Dane Allchorne, saw its potential and painstakingly restored the historic building, creating a beautiful 'The Milk House' – recalling Sissinghurst's former name, which changed after a local 19th-century smuggling gang brought it unwanted notoriety. The Allchornes kept many of its original features – like the ancient timber beams and Tudor fireplace, restoring what was once a prosperous community hub and gathering place for locals.

The Allchornes carefully injected their light-hearted humour and style into the building creating a cool and sophisticated country inn which has a great buzz. It's informal, contemporary and open-plan; the interiors are airy, simple yet stylish, soft Farrow & Ball 'stone' tones and a dairy theme throughout.

In the bar are fireside sofas, cushioned benches and old wooden tables. A long bar encased in weaved willow runs along one wall; wooden crates are tagged to the wall behind it, showcasing spirits, local wines and large glass



jars of nuts. At the black chestnut bar counter, a couple of old timers play backgammon, the woven twig lampshades casting fragmented light across their board.

In the dining room, painted beams, stout lamps, enormous mirrors, milk pails, pitchers of fresh flowers and bold local artwork add touches of finesse. Throughout dark walnut-stained floors add a sense of drama. There's a separate private dining room demarcated with plaited hazel hurdles.

During the summer months everyone decants onto the sun-trap side terrace. So, be sure to arrive early and bag a seat at the huge central table made from vast slabs of local timber. The 'Hopper Hut' outside bar dispenses chilled beer, local rosé wines and jugs of Pimm's; there's also an outside wood-fired pizza kitchen. Under a tall Horse Chestnut tree is a small pond with several ducks on high alert for snacks, beyond which is a lawn area with picnic benches. Heron's Nest play equipment and views across an apple orchard and a lush forest beyond completes the family atmosphere.

Continuing the dairy theme, the clutch of four elegant upstairs rooms called the Buttery, Churn, Dairy and Byre (with their own entrance) are uncluttered, spacious with crisp white Egyptian cotton linens and down duvets. The rooms are dressed in chic fabrics, upholstered Queen Anne armchairs, painted furniture, fresh flowers, floral paintings, antique rugs and subtle taupe 'stony ground' shades of Farrow & Ball.

All but the Byre overlook the main street, but double-glazing keeps traffic noise to a minimum. Light sleepers should splash out on the Byre, which is also the largest room and comes complete with a claw-foot bath in a vaulted bathroom which overlooks pretty orchards.

The Buttery is a comfortable twin with a bath and shower; the Churn is a double with shower only; and the Dairy is a good-size double with a contemporary four-poster bed and original brick fireplace. All come with comfortable Mattison beds, modern bathrooms, rain showers and full-sized local Romney Marsh Wools toiletries.



There's also a generous tea tray and all 21st-century creature comforts.

The timber-framed dining room is a local favourite featured in the Michelin Guide. Directed by owner Dane Allchorne, Chef Sam Winter keeps dishes simple, and works with the seasons, using only the freshest ingredients sourced from the rich local pantries of suppliers within a 20-mile radius of Sissinghurst. The kitchen delivers authentic British

cooking, refined with creative dishes like chilli tomato soup delivered with local artisan bread as light as air; Jerusalem artichoke and swiss chard tart with crumbled feta and basil; and the dish that will send shivers down your spine is the pan-fried mullet, crab and samphire risotto, dill and buttered leek ribbons. And the dessert to top it all off is Chef Sam's Pomegranate cheesecake, with kiwi, lychee and pistachios – 'boom'.

The classic menu has everything you'd expect a good gastro-pub to serve. Chef Sam creates classics like bitter beer-battered cod with skinny fries, minted pea puree, charred lemon, and lemon-thyme tartare sauce; and chicken, tarragon and leek pie, filo crust – all delivered with an imaginative twist and hints of flavours from around the world, which is very much in keeping with the relaxed ethos of the establishment.



- Sissinghurst is the perfect place for a day out with the historic castle and gardens just half a mile's walk from The Milk House. (www.nationaltrust.org.uk/sissinghurst-castle-garden)
- A five-minute drive from The Milk House is the pretty village of Cranbrook. Chaney & Son is a divine little bakery you simply must stop at. (www.chaneyandsonbakery.co.uk)
- Kent is renowned for its vineyards – the award-winning Chapel Down Estate (www.chapeldown.com), Biddenden Vineyards (www.biddendenvineyards.com) and Oxney Wine Estate (www.oxneyestate.com) are within easy reach and all offer a variety of private tastings and tours.
- The nearby town Tenterden is great for shopping with lots of interesting boutiques and cafes to explore.
- Tenterden is also the home of the Kent and East Sussex Railway, one of the country's finest examples of a rural light railway. (www.kesr.org.uk)
- Housed in two WW2 Nissen buildings opposite the Kent & East Sussex Railway in Tenterden, is the Old Dairy Brewery, who offer ale tastings. (www.olddairybrewery.com)

Breakfast involves a buffet of berry compotes, homemade muesli, breads, pastries Northiam Dairy yoghurt and cooked to order items including crushed avocados on toast topped with a poached egg, vegetarian, full English and smoked kippers and my personal favourite – scrambled eggs made with salted butter and heavy cream.

Along with the Barrow House, their sister pub in Egerton, The Milk House will spoil you for all other gastro-pubs, breaking out the crystal especially for you. ^{AC}

www.innplaces.co.uk

Written and photographed by
Cindy-Lou Dale