

A twist on some old classics

Head chef Claire Nicholls is a champion of Herefordshire produce, writes Richard McComb

Cooking usually reflects the character and outlook of its creator. This isn't, of course, always a good thing, particularly if the chef is a ham-fisted egotist with megalomaniac tendencies.

Claire Nicholls is none of these things. She is a local Herefordshire chef, both good humoured, modestly tenacious and technically adept, who has grown up in a county blessed with fine produce and a commitment to flavoursome, honest cooking. If you want irritating pretension and vacuous presentation, Claire isn't the chef for you.

Everyone mucks in in her kitchen. When we meet before dinner service, she makes it politely clear that she can't be too long because she is working one of the sections. Tonight, she is on the larder, focusing on starters – but she will also be on the hot plate, inspecting dishes before they are sent out to the dining room, and she will not escape washing up duties either.

"I am not one of these chefs that just stands at the pass. Everyone gets to do everything in my kitchen," says Claire. It is an eclectic mix back there, with a Japanese pastry chef and a Hungarian sous chef.

"I like to use my chefs' backgrounds for influences," says Claire, who is 35. "I like taking the classics and twisting them to make them modern, but I try not to be too outlandish."

She talks about chefs who take a pea, turn it into a purée and then shape it so it looks like a pea again. "What is the point in that? I don't want to be pretentious," adds Claire.

She trained at Hereford Technical College before moving to Birmingham College of Food, now University College Birmingham, for a further year.

Her first job was at Lake Vyrnwy Hotel, a country

house hotel in Wales, and moved to The Old Vicarage in Bridgnorth before starting at Castle House Hotel in 2000. She has been head chef since 2006.

Claire's father Nick is in the Army Air Corp and she became influenced by Asian cuisine as a child when her family spent four years in Hong Kong as part of his job. A dish of carpaccio of smoked sirloin with pickled spring onions and wasabi mayonnaise reflects her past in the Far East.

The menu is changed seasonally and makes the most of the area's wonderful fruits. Treberva fruit farm at Much Birch regularly supplies apples, pears, plums and greengages. "You name it, they have it," says Claire. Treberva gooseberries are served with grilled Cornish mackerel and a dessert features a gooseberry mousse with ginger ice and elderflower jelly. At breakfast, guests can choose between Treberva's Doyenne du Comice pear juice or Red Windsor apple juice.

Soft fruits like strawberries and raspberries come from Oakchurch Farm at Staunton On Wye.

The beef, says Claire, has to be from Herefords and she is looking forward to being exclusively supplied

with Ballingham beef from hotel owner David Watkins' nearby farm.

Claire says: "We have to use Hereford beef. The fact content and the marbling are just right and it is such good quality meat. I don't think it would be right to sell any other breed. Aberdeen Angus in Hereford just doesn't sound right."

The hotel's restaurant has been awarded two AA rosettes (there is also a bistro menu). I enjoy a good meal, starting with crispy pork belly sitting on sweetcorn purée (not made to look like sweetcorn) with seared scallops and chilli jam. Claire has been keen to make the restaurant, once seen as "too posh" by some locals in previous incarnations, more accessible and the main courses are classically informed. I have the loin of local lamb with braised shoulder, little gems, sweet peas and mint and fondant potato. It is unfussy, well-flavoured, rewarding cooking. The chocolate parfait that follows, with smoked Maldon salt and caramel "caviar," is pretty good too. The seven-course tasting menu is £50.

The good news for diners who enjoy a leisurely end to the day – and an equally leisurely start to the

Modern British cuisine – beef, of course – at Castle House Hotel, Hereford



Claire Nicholls, 35, who is head chef at the impressive Castle House Hotel in Hereford, left

