

Room service

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Paddy Burt stays at The Compasses Inn, Tisbury, Salisbury.

Our daughter phones. She is on the A303. "Can you recommend a pub where we can get a reasonable meal, somewhere near here?" I can't, but then I remember a reader's letter that "highly recommends the Compasses Inn at Lower Chicks Grove". "Perfect."

Why don't we give it a try, too? The Compasses Inn looks like everyone's dream of a 14th-century country pub. It has a thatched roof (with what I at first thought was a real pheasant perched on top) and a stone-paved path leading up to a front door with a lift-up latch. This, in turn, leads into the bar, where a buzz of conversation tells us that everyone's having a good time.

Here, one of the young members of staff finds a key, then takes us outside again and up some covered steps to a small sitting-room with a sofa and a glass-fronted cupboard full of books. Leading directly off it is a delightful bedroom. "We've just had a new carpet fitted in here," she says proudly, "and a new flat-screen television." Even better, there is a sofa from which to watch it. Everything else, including the elegant furniture and the bathroom, also seems new. Above the bath is a proper shower. The only things missing are a grab handle and a curtain, but I'm nit-picking.
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Back in the bar, flat irons and cider jars decorate the ancient hearth, where there's a blazing log fire. After finding our reserved corner table, where we sit side by side on a high-backed old settle, we meet Jess. She not only takes our order and brings the food but, in between times, nurtures that fire, encouraging it every so often with a pair of bellows. "We're always teasing her about it," says Alan, the owner.

The menu has some appealing things on it: my goat's cheese and onion tartlet and my husband's game terrine with home-made tomato and sultana chutney. "Ah," he says, after a moment, "what I particularly like are these thin slices of herb bread. They have been baked rather than toasted." He has another nibble. "In fact, they're like savoury biscuits," he adds. I borrow one for a bite, and it's so good I finish it.

For my main course I choose brill, with orange and grapefruit, while he picks the belly of pork and pork fillet. Accompanying these are a dish of perfectly cooked vegetables, plus new potatoes and chips. Now, Toby, the chef, appears. When I ask him about his choice of fruit accompanying the brill, he says: "Fish is traditionally served with lemon, so why not other citrus fruit?" Why not indeed.

My husband is puzzled because he has two completely different cuts of pork on his plate. "How generous," he says. "Either one of these would have been a substantial meal."

"Ah, but this is the country," I remind him, "and in a cosy inn like this people might feel cheated if there were less."

"Well," he says, "perhaps they ought to have a Farmer's menu and a Townie's menu."

For afters, I choose my favourite of all puds, crème brûlée, which comes in an oval dish with a brûlée-coloured rim. Very good it is. He chooses the apple walnut and raisin jalousie - well, that's what they call it. "Would have been OK without the leathery pastry base," he says.

Upstairs, the bed looks comfortable, "But isn't," says my husband, muttering something about the mattress being too hard and the duvet too heavy. Maybe he's right, but I'm someone who sleeps like the proverbial log.

Breakfast is laid in the small dining-room, where the manager, Rob, is on duty. I ask if they do porridge. "Yes," he says and, when he brings it he asks whether I would like honey or brown sugar. Honey sounds lovely, but I choose brown sugar. Less messy.

When we pay the bill, Rob tells us that the owners, Alan and his wife, Susie, live in the cottage next door. Then Jess arrives for work, so we tell her how impressed we were with her fire management skills. "You obviously haven't been here when I've filled the place with smoke," she replies.

The Compasses Inn, Lower Chicksgrove, Tisbury, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP3 6NB (01722 714318, www.thecompassesinn.com), has four double rooms.

Paddy Burt paid £75 for b&b; £7.40 for drinks; £50.50 for dinner. Total: £132.90.