



▲ Head Chef Gareth Rufus

Warm up in Warwickshire

Brace yourself from the bitter winter chill and stop by The Howard Arms for scrumptious grub in an unexpected find

If you've booked yourself a table or room at The Howard Arms in Ilmington, Shipston-on-Stour, plan to arrive with a couple of hours of daylight ahead of you. This charming village in the North Cotswolds may not be on the main tourist route – there is after all only one shop – but that is to its advantage and yours. Soak up the sleepy atmosphere of the place, feel your pulse slow down and let your appetite build nicely before dinner. The Howard Arms will not disappoint.

Within the small latticework of back lanes, there are russet golden houses spilling over with pretty gardens, a babbling brook and a fine 11th-century church blessed with Mousey Thompson mice hiding on the pulpit and pews and a glorious embroidered Apple Map made by local residents. Around the Upper Green, you will find Grump Street and Frog Lane, and the lovely village community shop and café recently converted from the small Catholic church. The shelves are plump with local fruit and veg in season, local beers and cakes, and if you spend over £30, you get to ring the old church bell!

As you push open the door to The Howard Arms you're welcomed by instant warmth and charm. Given a complete but discreet makeover in early 2016, it is now a bustling friendly inn with plenty of dark nooks and crannies showing off its four-hundred-year history and fine flagstone floor, while blending in with cool cladding, modern rustic soft furnishing and funky lighting.

The clever renovation has created a raised dining area so that it is just a few steps up from the bar – giving it a sense of occasion but with the lively atmosphere of the pub as backdrop. The tables are civilised in their distance from one another (if you are an eavesdropper, you'll be miffed) and there are sound dampeners installed. You can choose to eat here or in the many little

comfy mismatched chairs in the pub area – make for the fireside spot with its two enveloping armchairs and you may just fall asleep with a glass of port in your hand.

Run by the super-friendly Rob Jeal, who started out as a landscape gardener, and then went on to cheffing before taking advantage of his natural gift for managing, The Howard Arms opens, well, its arms, to walkers, cyclists, city peace-and-quiet seekers, but without a doubt its local residents.

'The local customers create a great ambience here,' says Rob. 'We often have lots of farmers in and the local Aunt Sally team plays in the garden – it creates a lively environment. There is no divide and everyone talks to each other.'

'We are all about pubby comfort food done really well including fish and chips and liver and mash, which is very popular, and we also do some à la carte dishes and have one rosette now. We were offered two, but we declined because it would change the clientele.'

As you enjoy the 'someone's front room' atmosphere, take advantage of the local beers – Hookey, Stratford Gold, Purity from nearby Warwick – or the Grumpy Frog Cider.

'It is brewed by Bill and Rita, two of our regular locals – they have a house in between Grump Street and Frog Lane, hence the intriguing name!' says Rob.

So what can you expect to tuck into before heading home or upstairs to one of the beautifully fresh and spacious rooms? Gareth Rufus, head chef and Rob's old mucker, is finely tuned into his customers.

'You make the food fit the place, people prefer to come to a pub and have something rustic but we do à la carte food with a bit more of an edge, too' says Gareth, who sources as locally as possible, with vegetables and fruit from Chipping Camden and the Evesham Vale.





CONTACT DETAILS

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HEARTY GAME CASSEROLE

- 2 sticks of celery, thickly sliced
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2-3 large carrots, roughly/chunkily chopped
- 2 parsnips, roughly/chunkily chopped
- 5 bay leaves
- 2 sprigs of thyme
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1 tbsp butter
- 2 tbsp plain flour
- 2 tbsp tomato puree
- 2 tbsp Worcestershire sauce (optional)
- 2 beef stock cubes (crumbled)
- 850g diced game meat (pheasant, venison, rabbit)
- 1 large glass of red wine (optional)

1 Heat your oven to 160°C/(140°C fan)/325°F/Gas Mark 3. Put the celery, onion, carrots, parsnips, bay leaves and thyme into a large casserole pan with 1 tbsp of oil and the butter, soften in the pan for approx. 10 minutes then stir in the plain flour until it doesn't look 'dusty' anymore, then add the tomato puree, Worcestershire sauce and crumbled stock cubes and stir. Gradually stir in 700ml of hot water and bring to a gentle simmer.

2 Caramelize the meat in a saucepan with the other tbsp of vegetable oil then add to the casserole pan. Pour the red wine into the saucepan and swill round. Scrape off any crispy bits, then pour this into the casserole mix. Cover and place in the oven for 2 hours. Uncover and cook for a further 30 mins to an hour until the meat is really tender and the sauce is thickened.

3 Serve with a selection of root vegetables, braised red cabbage, or creamed mash.

'Winter is my favourite cooking season. We always run with a pie or a stew, and very often venison and pheasant casseroles. We use fine suppliers such as Aubrey Allen in Leamington and Barry The Butcher in Stratford for our meat and game.'

Warm the cockles with braised pork belly, Savoy cabbage, mash and caramelised shallots, calves liver with smoked bacon gravy, corn-fed chicken with quinoa and Mediterranean vegetables. And if you are here for the duration, raspberry and white chocolate cheesecake with ginger popcorn or sticky toffee pudding with toffee sauce and quite a big spoonful of clotted cream.

Retire to the fireside to plan your evening escapades or your adventure for the following day – Stratford is a short drive from The Howard Arms, the magical Hidcote Manor and gardens and Kiftsgate Court, both a few miles away also – or simply enjoy the bonhomie of the place while keeping an ear out for the local chappie called Chuckles.