

Auberge du Lac, Brocket Hall, Welwyn

Unforgettable experience

‘UNFORGETTABLE’ is one of those epithets that have lost their meaning due to overuse. After all, we have all been to ‘unforgettable’ concerts/movies/plays/restaurants, but how many can we actually recall?

One restaurant that is, however, worthy of this sobriquet can be found within a proverbial stone’s throw of Welwyn and Hatfield on the Brocket Hall estate.

The parkland setting is memorable in itself. Meander your way around the twisting drive that seems to be going everywhere and nowhere at one and the same time, and eventually you will come across a piece of French heaven nestling within this quintessentially English retreat.

The Auberge du Lac is a converted 18th-century hunting lodge perfectly situated on the lake. To sit outside on a balmy evening, enjoying the views of the house across the water, while enjoying one’s first bubbly, a champagne Tattinger 98 for me, and nibbles of the evening is heaven-sent; but what a treat awaits you when you are presented with the menu.

The reason is immediately obvious. This restaurant is the brainchild of Jean-Christophe Novelli – the chef-patron who has already been awarded four Michelin stars, having made his name a decade ago in Clerkenwell’s Maison Novelli.

‘Sadly, cooking and loving are

the only human expressions,’ he tells us, ‘which allow us to combine all five senses at the same time.’ And does Jean-Christophe grab those senses with a passion!

Frankly you’d be mad not to go with a close friend – one with whom you can dive in unashamedly to one another’s choice of dishes, for to limit yourself to one selection from each of the five possible courses will leave you feeling deprived.

Round one began with Tourteaux crab, avocado and Norwegian prawns with poached quail’s egg, caviar, mixed leaves and anchovy dressing.

But I could have gone for the terrine of cassoulet with foie gras, or a soft duck liver parfait or even a gaspacho-style soup. To go with this, we chose a bottle of the Kim Crawford Riesling, crisp and delicious.

This was closely followed by ‘Cervela chavignol cheese with caramelised Granny Smith and cured duck foie gras with green lentil soya and garden lamb lettuce’. And how lucky I had gone with a friend who allowed me to raid her ‘capes, scallops with black pudding and celeriac mousseline’, all beautifully presented in scallop shells that had been coated with a light pastry. Magic!

If you’re feeling adventurous you could try a braised pig’s trotter stuffed ‘according to Jean-Christophe’s spontaneous mood’. It



□ Diners relax on the terrace of Auberge du Lac, with Brocket Hall in the background. Top picture: Auberge du Lac, left, and Brocket Hall, right.

might not be to everyone’s taste, but it offers a cacophony of different flavours all setting off an unmistakable ‘piggy’ flavour.

Get your friend to order the Welsh lamb with Szechuan pepper, scallop with truffle, foie gras and tagliatelle and you could be forgiven for thinking the angels had come down for you before your time.

Sheer heaven on a plate enhanced even more by our chosen red wine, a delectable Chateau Latourette Payillac.

Prices: A la carte are around £8 for the starters and £16 for the main courses.

For special occasions, you could plump for a six-course special at £85; or, if your budget is more modest, try going at lunchtime where a three-course meal, including wine, will set you back a mere £28. An absolute bargain.

Check out their website at www.brocket-hall.co.uk or ring 01707 368888 to be sure of getting a place.

An unforgettable experience? I’d say so!



□ Jean-Christophe Novelli – the chef-patron, left, and, above, the cosy lounge, ideal for drinks on cooler days.