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Coquetvale Hotel, Rothbury

I THINK I have uncovered a gem.

And judging by the packed Italia Plus restaurant on a dull Wednesday evening, I appear not to be the only one.

The place was buzzing when we dropped in for a meal last week. I could only imagine how busy it would become on a Friday or Saturday night.

The Coquetvale was refurbished and relaunched last year and is still undergoing changes under a further new management.

It has been a splendid transformation. On entering the spacious bar and restaurant, it is like venturing into another world – dark brown decor, leather settees, soaring ceilings with colossal, ornate roses and cornices. There is a feeling of colonial splendour, a relaxing, warm setting, with huge vases of fresh flowers, sparkling chandeliers, and smartly-dressed staff on hand to tend to your culinary needs.

This is chic on a grand scale. If the food lived up to the surroundings we were in for a treat.

We chose to sink into the luxurious settees in the bar area to peruse the menu with a drink. The house red wine was very palatable and made the experience that more enjoyable! Our orders were taken and we were shown through to our table when the starters were ready – what extravagance! This was how it should be done.

It was worth taking our time over the menu – there was a lot to take in – antipasti and seafood antipasti, pasta, pizza and fish main courses, not to mention the chef's specials. The children were very comfortable choosing half-portions from the main menu (under 12s are offered a half-portion of any pizza and pasta with fries and a soft drink for £4.45).

All tastes seemed to be covered – there was everything from simple pizzas (from £5.30 to £6.45) and chicken Kiev (pollo Kiev, £11) to more exotic dishes, like beef thallyata (pan fried beef scallop with red wine balsamic sauce served with roccola butter sauce, £11.20) or pesce spada con capperi i Alici (pan fried sword fish with capers, plus white wine, garlic and anchovies sauce, £14.95).

We were hungry to start with but the menu was making us ravenous!

We elected to pool our starters – patata buccia (deep fried potato skins with chilli dip, £2.95), funghi impanare (breaded deep fried mushrooms, £3.75) and garlic pizza bread (£3.30). At these prices in a hotel we expected mere tasters but were pleasantly surprised – each dish was substantial and absolutely delicious to boot. With warm bread rolls to welcome us we were not going to starve!

The potato skins were thick and quite oily, giving them a splendidly indulgent flavour, while the mushrooms melted in the mouth inside a crunchiness, but dry, shell.

Our main courses followed in a similar vein. My gamberoni all'aglio (king prawns pan fried in olive oil with garlic, white wine and parsley, £13) was superb – no exaggeration. It was beautifully presented with the prawns arranged around a mini flowerpot of mixed salad leaves. The sauce was aromatic and oozing garlic – a fine combination. The accompanying vegetables – the carrots and broccoli in particular – were crispy and would not suit everyone's taste, although I prefer this kind of firmness.

My wife's ravioli frutti di mare (smoked salmon and crayfish with tomato and cream sauce, £6.20) was equally tasty, freshly-made and in a sauce to die for.

The children also enjoyed their Margherita pizzas with thin authentic bases, although both confessed to be fairly full after the starters! Despite this they managed to share my profiteroles (with warm chocolate sauce and Italian liqueur cream, £4.70) – a dessert with that wow factor – and my wife's lemon chello sorbet (£3.95).

We then adjourned to those comfy settees for coffees.

This was one of the best meals we have had on our jaunt round north Northumberland – excellent food, great service and wonderful atmosphere. The bill was £68.70, not expensive considering the courses we'd had and the quality of food and service.

I have since learned that the chefs have been trained to five-star hotel standard in Dubai – it didn't surprise me. At the time, I somehow managed to miss the sword fish on the menu, despite spending ages reading it, so I'll have to return!

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