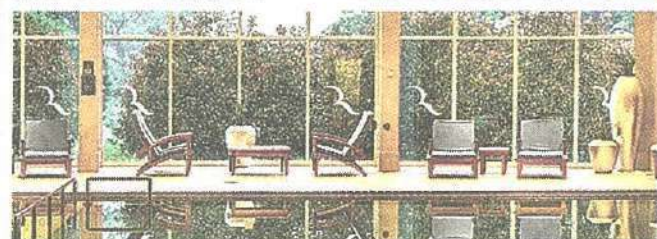
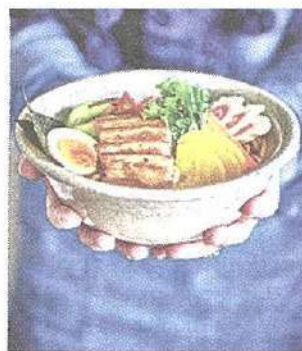




Travel



100 Great British hotels



Find your ideal city, coastal or rural retreat with our 32-page guide

Travel Best Places to Stay 2019

Picking our top 100 British hotels this year was a mighty struggle. There are simply so many great options, from the wilds of Scotland to deepest Somerset (and that's just this page). We persevered, and can now reveal our definitive list. You're in for a treat



KEY

	Restaurant
	Dogs allowed
	Accessible*
£	Under £100
££	£101-£200
£££	Over £200

*Please contact the hotel to check that it matches your requirements



HOTEL OF THE YEAR

2019

The interiors of the Fife Arms are as flamboyant as its Highlands setting, discovers *Jeremy Lazell*

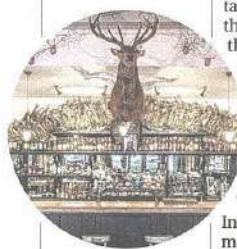
THE FIFE ARMS ABERDEENSHIRE £££

Most Highland hotels do not have a Picasso in the drawing room. But the Fife Arms is not most Highland hotels.

Purchased in 2014 by Iwan and Manuela Wirth (the art-world power couple behind the Hauser & Wirth gallery in Bruton, Somerset), this neglected coaching inn in Braemar reopened in December after a four-year refurbishment that doesn't so much beggar belief as make you rethink what a hotel can be.

The owners won't say how much they spent, but if the Lucian Freud in reception – his 1962 portrait of his daughter Annie – and the Louise Bourgeois spider in the courtyard are anything to go by, it's shedloads.

The impact is instant. At reception, it's impossible to focus on the check-in patter due to the multicoloured neon



STAG DO The pub at the Fife Arms, Braemar

antler chandelier above your head and the tinkle of Beatles tunes playing on a bleach-splattered Steinway grand piano – both special commissions from contemporary artists in Los Angeles.

There are more than 14,000 artworks across the hotel's three floors, and tours take place most evenings: it's Night at the Museum meets Moma, with views through Scots pines of the Cairngorms and the River Clunie crashing below.

Despite it all, this is still a solid, no-nonsense Victorian coaching inn, with six open fires in the reception rooms, wonky pine floors, Persian rugs and Highland watercolours – originals by Queen Victoria and Prince Charles, naturally. In the bedrooms, Russell Sage Studio's makeover is a riot of William Morris wallpaper and blood-red brocade, Victorian antiques and portraits. There are china cups and saucers for your tea and tweed covers on the hot-water bottles, old-school pull chains above

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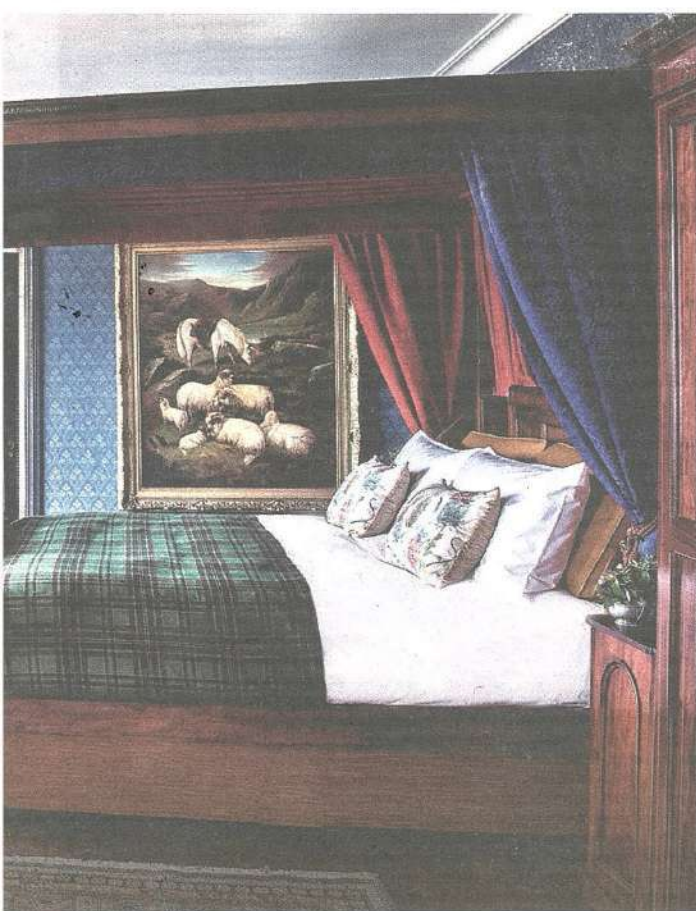
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WRITE TO TRAVEL AND WIN £250
TOWARDS A HOLIDAY IN GREECE

Sunvil Send your favourite hotels to travel@sunday-times.co.uk. For full details, and to read this week's winning letter from reader John Sargent, visit thesundaytimes.co.uk/lettersoftheweek

BIG SHOT

Richard Jackson wins this week's competition, in association with Audley Travel (audleytravel.com). Enter at thesundaytimes.co.uk/thebigshot or use #STBigShot on Instagram; tag @sundaytimstravel



the loos and the odd copper bathtub. It's like going to bed in Queen Victoria's chamber, but with Nespresso machines and smart televisions.

There are 46 rooms, ranging from cosy Crofts – wooden cabin beds and landscape paintings – to indecently opulent Royal Suites, some with four-posters, one with a pair of Queen Victoria's stockings framed on the wall. One of the 13 Nature and Poetry Rooms is dedicated to Robert Louis Stevenson, who started writing *Treasure Island* on holiday in Braemar; it has a stuffed parrot in one corner and a treasure chest in another.

Not everyone will love it. For one thing, the hotel is a Victorian horror show of stuffed eagles and birds in glass domes; vegans might want to avoid the corridor by the boot room, a gothic killing field of mounted heads, including stags, foxes, wildebeest and boars. But it's funny and it's fun, like a brazenly poor-taste Clarkson quip that leaves you open-mouthed and sniggering for more.

How the staff don't let it go to their heads is beyond me. They're wonderful, mostly from the surrounding Highland villages, and quick to tease me about the lightness of my luggage: "Plenty of room for a Picasso, eh?"

That down-to-earth welcome extends to the hotel's pub. OK, there's a flying stag suspended from the ceiling, but this is a pub first and foremost, with a dartboard beside the snug (lined with original works by the Victorian animal painter Archibald Thorburn). In the restaurant, Scotland's larder looms large – venison, Orkney scallops and meat from Prince Charles's Aberdeenshire farm – alongside fermented kohlrabi and birch-seared fish. The food is good, but with a vast 16th-century Old Master dominating one wall, a second stuffed stag and a dazzling mural by the

One of the Royal Suites at the Fife Arms, pictured below



Argentine artist Guillermo Kuitca, the chef needs more flair to match the setting.

What to do when not drinking single malts with the life-size Queen Victoria mannequin in the gloriously gothic library or ogling Man Ray photos in the glitzy art-deco cocktail bar? Well, a small spa offers massages, saunas and facials; and a riverside garden is still bedding in. The Highland Games Centre, housed in a handsome new pavilion next to the spot where the Queen watches the games every year, is a two-minute walk away. You can explore 17th-century Braemar Castle and visit Balmoral, a 15-minute drive east.

Just leave plenty of time for gawping. I steal one last look at that Picasso in the lounge and gaze up from the sofa at Zhang Enli's psychedelic ceilingscape. It's bonkers that this should exist anywhere, but in a Victorian inn marooned in the Highlands countryside? Get here quick, before someone with a bigger suitcase than mine spoils the fun.

Jeremy Lazell was a guest of the Fife Arms, which has doubles from £250, B&B; mains from £18; thefifearms.com

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR

THE NEWT
SOMERSET W & £££

Come on, come on. I'm sitting in the car outside the Newt, waiting for the electric gate. It's opening at roughly the speed of climate change. Or maybe I'm just tetchy, stressed and in need of the Arcadian fantasy that I'm led to believe awaits me on the other side.

In the weeks following its August opening, the Newt, near Bruton, was widely feted. But it's one thing for a new hotel to impress when the sun's out and tails are up. What about with winter closing in? Early in the week? I call it the "rainy Monday night test".

Rain is not something the hotel's billionaire owners, Koos Bekker and his wife, Karen Roos, overly struggle with in the Cape Winelands – home of the Newt's glamorous South African half-sister, Babylonstoren. But this is east Somerset, rather than the Western Cape, and relocating that successful blend of rustic-chic accommodation and farm-to-fork living isn't without its challenges.

Koos and Karen fell for the Newt – known locally as the Emily Estate – in 2013, when they spotted it in *Country Life*. Continuing (eventually) up the drive and over the hilltop to see the Georgian manor centrepiece and grounds laid out below, I'm not surprised.

Guests are dropped at a perimeter shepherd's hut, which must have sounded good in the strategy meetings, but is far from optimal in October drizzle. I'm greeted by a "valet" towing a trolley into which I place my bag, then we amble past the Stable Yard to the main house.

I know why they make you arrive this way. Shock and awe. On the left, in stand-and-gawp juxtaposition, are a walled kitchen garden and a futuristic gym fronted by what my valet assures me is the largest single pane of glass in Europe.

Oversized glass fitted into toffee-coloured stone is a motif at the Newt, and there it is again in the spa, to your right, where a converted cowshed harbours a softly lit indoor/outdoor pool that could be heated by Instagram likes alone. The outdoor bit is particularly special: it has sides like an aquarium tank, volcanic bubbles at the press of a button, and a temperature that makes the falling rain fizz when I sneak back after dark.

Let's continue – don't forget that trolley – and on your left are the Newt's most popular digs. Ten of its 23 rooms are in outbuildings, and such is the variety, you're best off asking for a menu. This is Llamrei's Stable, named after one of King Arthur's horses. There's

a brickwork floor, a heavy timber door leading to a chic ensuite with a freestanding bath and woodburner, and a king-size bed wedged into a horsebox. Protruding above is an extravagantly upholstered faux-taxidermy stallion's head by the French artist Frédérique Morrel. It's part Corleone, part Graham Norton.

But I'm not in this bridle suite. I've gone entry level – another good test of a hotel's true credentials – with a loft room. Heavily distressed beams have me ducking, views stretch over the lawn to the estate's 65 acres of apple orchard and there's a stylish charcoal/white bathroom that I want to dismantle, metro tile by metro tile, and take home.

Karen, a former Elle Decoration South Africa editor, has overseen the hotel's styling. Muted creams and pale greens provide the canvas for subversive flourishes: more Morrel animal heads, curiously cropped portraits, circular table lamps like futuristic Scalextrics. In the Botanical Rooms restaurant, gentlemen's club-style panelling and sage banquettes are enlivened by a socking great gold-bauble chandelier.

The restaurant, serving produce grown on the estate, has proved popular with visiting travel writers – but some London food critics have marked it down. I follow my

game-bird terrine and venison with coffee in the Croquet Room, where I hang out in a wicker ovoid seat, listening to Nina Simone on the turntable.

"Get out there and get lost," the barman says, later, when I ask how I should spend the next day. I think I know what he means. Pulling on Hunters and a poncho in the boot room pre-breakfast, I strike out across the croquet lawn, through the Victorian fragrance gardens, past ponds with iron newt fountains, and the walled Parabola.

The "cyder" press and cellar are gearing up for their daily demonstrations, and aproned staff are raiding the sprawling kitchen gardens. I loop up through the woodland to the edge of the deer park (which will open to guests next year, along with a subterranean museum of gardening – sexier than it sounds, I'm assured) and find myself on a high point from which I can pick out King Alfred's Tower one way and Glastonbury Tor the other.

By the time I'm back for breakfast, I'm thoroughly de-stressed. Eight hundred acres. Twenty-three rooms. Luxury means many things to many people: here at the Newt, it's an extravagance of space.

Duncan Craig

The Newt has doubles from £255, B&B; mains from £16; thenewtinsomerset.com

VIDEO

See inside the hotel at
thesundaytimes.co.uk/
newt or see our
tablet edition



The Newt, Somerset; below, the spa



Travel Best Places to Stay 2019

WALES

★ WINNER ★

THE ROYSTON

NEW POWYS 11 12 ££

This seven-room guesthouse in Llanbrynmair opened last Easter after a six-figure, three-year refurbishment. The Victorian house has limited-edition prints on smoke-grey walls, squishy chairs in acid-green fabrics and bedrooms with mid-century furniture and toiletries by the Danish brand Meraki. None has a TV. Don't worry, the wi-fi is fast – but the Royston will help you remember how to relax. Take a stroll before a terrific homemade dinner (pesto chicken salad, minted lamb and feta burgers), made with ingredients from the kitchen garden. Fancy a nightcap around a firepit after? Why not? Doubles from £110, B&B; three-course dinner £26; theroystonwales.com

THE GROVE

PEMBROKESHIRE 11 12 ££

Our Best Place to Stay in Wales last year, this whitewashed manor in Narberth has 14 rooms, and 12 cottage rooms and suites, with antique fireplaces, exposed beams and Welsh fabrics. The big draw is the food: a new chef has introduced dishes such as pigeon with black pudding and grapes to the menu in the Fernery restaurant. Anise-poached pineapple with yoghurt is served at breakfast, followed by afternoon tea, then cocktails in the dark-wood bar. And don't miss the homemade Welsh cakes at checkout. Doubles from £180, B&B; three-course dinner in the Fernery £69; thegrove-narberth.co.uk



The Grove, Narberth

LLANERCH NEW

VALE OF GLAMORGAN 11 12 ££

At this vineyard hotel, a 17th-century farmhouse meets slick modernity. The 26 new bedrooms and suites, split between the older courtyard and a new two-storey block, have countryside views, plush carpets, velvet sofas and kingsize beds. The bar, done up like a traditional pub, leads to the restaurant, which has views of the vineyard and indulgent dishes such as sea bass with garlic mash and peanut fondant for pudding. There's no spa or pool yet, but the wine tour (£12pp) will keep you busy. Doubles from £120; mains from £14; llanerch.co.uk

THE HARDWICK

MONMOUTHSHIRE 11 £££

Stephen Terry, the chef and owner of this restaurant with rooms near Abergavenny, serves no-nonsense, pro-local food. The main dining area has quarry tiles underfoot, heavy beams overhead and dishes such as braised beef shin topped with rarebit-style sourdough on the menu. There are eight bedrooms in an attractive wooden extension to the original farmhouse, with tree-trunk side tables, Melin Tregwynt blankets and smart monochrome bathrooms with walk-in showers. At breakfast, dishes such as smoked haddock with poached



eggs and wholegrain mustard will set you up for walks in the nearby hills. Doubles from £135, B&B; mains from £17; thehardwick.co.uk

ESCAPE BOUTIQUE B&B

CONWY ££

Llandudno is home to one of the hippest seaside hotels in Britain. The Escape is every white-stucco inch the elegant Victorian villa, with parquet floors, hand-carved fireplaces, stained-glass windows and oak panelling downstairs. Upstairs, funky design awaits. Each of the nine bedrooms has a distinct vibe, created with touches such as Eames-style swivel chairs, art deco bedside tables and a bold deckchair-striped headboard. There's no restaurant, but breakfasts are solid, and you're minutes from North Shore beach and Llandudno's pier. For a weekend fling at a decent price, this is the place. Doubles from £105, B&B; escapebandb.co.uk

STAR GAZING WHO'S STAYED WHERE

Idris Elba and **Luke Evans**, both tipped to take over the role of 007, have been recent guests at No 131, in Cheltenham, the Gloucestershire town's number-one bolthole. Bond's best-ever Moneypenny, **Naomie Harris** (right), prefers Soho Farmhouse, in Great Tew, for some R&R – and she's not alone.

The stylishly subversive country house is a 3D version of Hello! magazine most weekends, with **Adwoa Aboah**, **Gwendoline Christie**, **Victoria Pendleton** and **Tracey Emin** among the many who've put on wellies there. **Paloma Faith**, **Declan Donnelly** and **Ronni Ancona** have all enjoyed a cheeky cocktail down the road at Mollie's Motel & Diner, near Buckland.

Those who prefer a well-pulled pint could settle on the Lord Poulett Arms, a 17th-century inn near Crewkerne, where **Jack Whitehall**, **Hermione Norris** and **Matthew McConaughey** have raised a glass this year. **Prue Leith** gave its pub grub the thumbs-up.

If your mate's story starts with **Courteney Cox**, **Jimmy Carr** and **John Bishop** walking into a bar, it's not a joke – it's just another day at the Talbot Inn, in Mells, where the clientele matches the five-star food.



The comedian **Henning Wehn** was charmed by Tewkesbury Park and its 165 acres of

Gloucestershire countryside, as were **Fiona Bruce**, **James May**, **Nick Knowles** and **Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen**. If you're keener on the haunts of television chefs, gravitate to the Pigs in Dorset, Kent and Devon, where **Rick Stein**, **Gizzi Erskine** and **Mark Hix** have all tucked in.

Once rock stars have hit a certain age, family-friendly facilities become more important than all-night bars, although we can't quite picture **Noel Gallagher**, **Tony Hadley** and **Take That's Gary Barlow** and **Mark Owen** running through the new eco-friendly adventure playground at Rockliffe Hall, in Co Durham; we imagine they were more interested in its lavish spa.

The most talked-about hotel garden this year, however, belongs to our 2019 newcomer of the year, the Newt, in Somerset. **Guy Ritchie** has been seen strolling through its grounds, as have **Sam and Aaron Taylor-Johnson**. **Susan d'Arcy**

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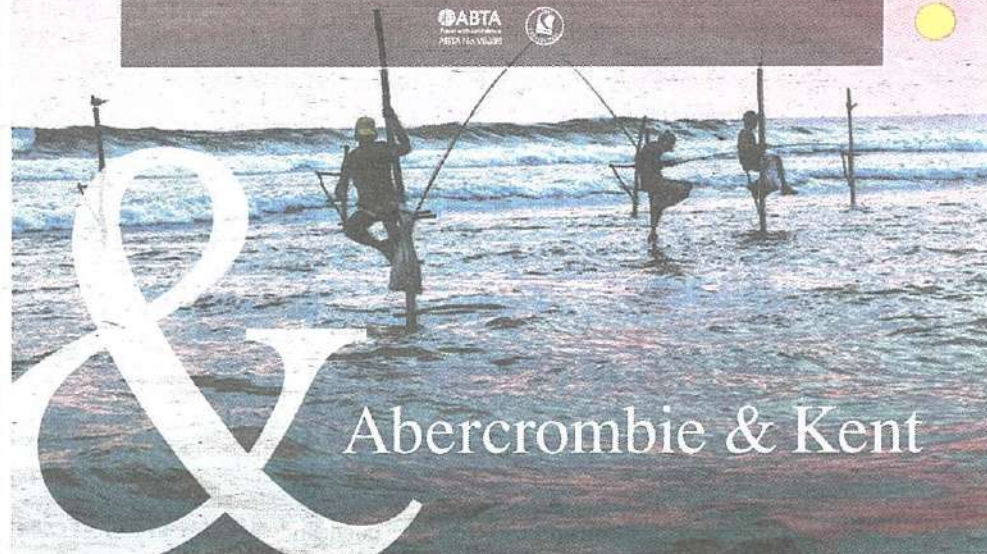
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Travel Best Places to Stay 2019



THE FIFE ARMS

NEW ABERDEENSHIRE

For full review, see page 2

SCHLOSS ROXBURGHE

BORDERS **¥¥ & £££**
What a difference £30m makes. The Duke of Roxburghe's Victorian castellated hotel near Kelso reopened in June after a boutique makeover. There's memorabilia is everywhere, from a vast portrait of the 7th Duke over the grand staircase to one duchess's book collection in the drawing room. In the 13 bedrooms in the main house, and the seven in the quiet courtyard block, lipstick-red lighting emerges from behind headboards and velvet patterned curtains cry out to be stroked. The food has French élan and many of the ingredients are grown on the estate. For all its good looks, Schloss Roxburghe has held on to its unfussy, old-money charm. This is a place to kick back after a hike around the castle's 300 landscaped acres. When a new wing arrives in 2021, it's going to be fit for a king. Doubles from £235, B&B; mains from £17; schloss-roxburghe.com

MARKET STREET HOTEL NEW

EDINBURGH **¥¥ & ££**
A 20-second stroll from Waverley station and two minutes from the Royal Mile, this isn't just the heart of Auld Reekie – it's the nerve centre. Built from scratch on a derelict car park, the seven-storey building is a modern take on a Scottish baronial fort. The rooms are chic, with sleek lines, white oak walls and bare bulbs. There's free booze in the minibar and a cork on your pillow inviting you to a free glass of champagne that can be quaffed in the top-floor bar, which has full-height windows, crushed-velvet rocking chairs and armchairs, curated artwork and steel columns cleverly disguised as shelves. This is a hotel that knows what guests want: small plates are served from lunch until 10pm; there are Apple TVs in every room and clothes steamers in every cupboard.

BEST ROMANTIC HOTEL

Doubles from £108, B&B; small plates from £5; carlton.nl/en/market-street-hotel-edinburgh

FINGAL NEW

EDINBURGH **¥¥ & £££**
Fingal, transformed by a £5m refurb, is a nautical but nice floating hotel permanently moored in Leith, Edinburgh's hippest 'hood. It has 23 rooms, some with direct deck access, and an intimate atmosphere. Each cabin is named after a Stevenson lighthouse served in the ship's previous life, when it ferried supplies between the Isle of Man, the Orkneys and the west coast of Scotland. The Classic cabins have portholes; the Luxury duplex cabins have freestanding baths and are reached via a glass walkway leading through the engine room. The Skerryvore Suite, which includes Princess Anne's former quarters, has a private deck and dining room, and will set you back £1,200 a night. Standout details include the lighthouse-inspired circular glass lift; curved wood panelling and polished wooden swivel seats modelled on the original radio officer's chair; leather-lined wardrobes; and handwoven bed runners by local designer Araminta Campbell. Doubles from £220, B&B; fingal.co.uk

THE BONNIE BADGER NEW

EAST LOTHIAN **¥¥ & ££**
A 40-minute drive east of Edinburgh, in the cute coastal village of Gullane, the Bonnie Badger, an 1836 coaching inn, is the latest venture from the Michelin-starred chef Tom Kitchin. The food, cooked by head chef Matthew Budge, is as good as you'd expect from an owner who won his first star at 29. It's not fine dining; instead, there's a confident, unfussy mix of pub classics such as homemade beef sausage, mash and onion, and seasonal mains including grouse with girolles, game chips and bread sauce. There are just 13

Continued on page 30 →



Getting active at Gleneagles. Top, Market Street Hotel, Edinburgh



DRINK UP THE EVOLUTION OF THE MINIBAR

Minibars are going healthy. Sort of. The leading country-house hotel **Lime Wood**, in the New Forest, recently asked the celebrity nutritionist Amelia Freer (who helps keep Victoria Beckham in size 6 dresses) to clean up its in-room act. You'll now find a Willy's Apple Cider Vinegar with Honey & Turmeric Shot (£3.50), and ethical, organic and vegan Ombars (£2.50), alongside bottles of whisky and bourbon (£50). "Minibars should be sensory experiences," says Robin Hutson, Lime Wood's chairman and chief executive. "Products need to be purposeful and fit our ethos of fun and wellbeing."

It's not all about stylish sobriety these days. We can rely on the party animals' favourite, **Soho House**, which has branches worldwide, to personalise its minibar with some irresistible retooling. So it now offers One While Changing – where a barman comes to your room between 6pm and 9pm to make a cocktail while you're getting ready. It's a complimentary service and, not surprisingly, it's very popular.

Other hotels that throw in freebies include the **Newt**, in Somerset, our newcomer of the year. Its in-room larders are stocked with homemade cyder (the "y" denotes it's considerably posher than Eddie Grundy's scrumpy), apple juice, biscuits, spiced nuts and cheese straws. **Heckfield Place**, in Hampshire, last year's hotel of the year, has its pastry team prepare fresh seasonal nibbles for each arrival. You can feast on hazelnut biscuits, cheese and walnut crackers and salted almonds while sipping homemade ginger beer, lemon verbena and raspberry and mint cordials.

Susan d'Arcy

