WHEN IN WITNEY: THE BEST PLACES TO GET A DRINK

I love my little town, especially at Christmas time. The council are always far too eager to turn the lights on as soon as December 1st rolls around, pubs knock out their Special Christmas Day lunches at the end of August, the smell of roasts and freshly made mulled wine fills the streets which makes them the perfect pitstop on a day spent shopping. Every year carol singers never fail to turn up at my door, Santa and his little helpers ride down the estates on their sleigh, handing out small packets of Haribo with a permanent smile swiped across their faces.

Lots of people come from all over to visit the Cotswolds during the festive season. Why wouldn’t you? It’s the perfect seasonal setting where you’ll find good pints, cosy cottages all with a fire burning and heart grub made with local produce. Witney’s free parking, adequate shops (both independent and high street), large cinema and more draws a lots of people in.

When my friend was searching for good places to visit in Witney, she was offered up nothing more than reviews on TripAdvisor (which isn’t the most reliable source, let’s be honest!) You want something for Oxford? You’ll find it! Burford? You bet! And if you are keen to visit Woodstock for the day you can be sure you’ll be offered a guide for that too. But Witney and it’s surrounding areas? Forget it. To rectify this and to offer people a local’s insight into what to do when you’re visiting, I have decided to put together a little summarisation of the best things to do/places to visit. Because I love organisation, I’m dividing the whole thing up into different posts, starting with the top places to get a tipple.

I asked people what they thought were the best bars/pubs *- not including food -* within a five-mile radius of the centre and, to my surprise received a **remarkable 220+ responses**. So, I tallied it all up and with my voice recorder in one hand and notepad and pen in the other, went out and carried my own \*cough\* research \*cough\* to find the best places to booze-cruise. Here it goes…

\*disclaimer\*

* Of course, there are many great options but for the sake of keeping this (albeit somewhat) short and sweet, I couldn’t include them all. Feel free to comment your favourite below!
* You may have to hop on the S1 or S2 bus or drive 5 minutes to get to some of these, but I PROMISE it’s worth it. You’ll thank me later…
* I had to limit the radius of which I was pooling my pubs from to avoid a lengthy list.

Grapes and Tomatoes

This place is a relatively new kid to the block only having opened last November but that doesn’t mean it’s any less excellent. As I arrive, I am greeted by a very friendly-faced Scarlett behind the bar who makes me a Blackberry Mojito (and a delicious one at that!) A very generous sized glass of fruity purple with a healthy hunk of lime for good measure, it’s difficult to resist the each to drink it all at once. Across the bar there is a middle-aged man reading the paper, enjoying a pint of Peroni while two ladies sip drinking wine at a stool in the middle. This is a place enjoyed by a diverse mix of people clearly. Without sounding cliché, the whole interior feels very shabby chic; fairy lights and candles on the table being the only source of light, soft, wooden furnishing and plush cushions compliment the mellow music being played. I’m told that all the furnishings are from local suppliers, as are the people employed to fit them and establish this place.

 I am joined by one of the four managers, Jimmy O’Brien, all of which live locally and have done for up to 22 years. By day they all have jobs at the local RAF base in Brize Norton as parachute jump instructors. After years of wanting to own a bar they eventually decided to bite the bullet on a work trip to America last year and, as if by magic, this place popped up for sale. Inspired by the opening of Siege Bar, their local ‘real-ale’ pub that recently opened in the area, the guys set out to establish a place that was suitable for everyone with a real emphasis on music, quality but affordable drinks and a ‘city feel.’ Jimmy tells me that on their opening night, the mayor thanked the guys for what they had done, bringing life and soul to a run-down town that people didn’t seem to give a second thought to. Since their opening and new Italian restaurant has opened across the road, as-well as a rather swanky café.

There’s always a DJ on a Thursday that plays a range of disco to funky-house music and every Saturday local musicians play live music like *Into the Ark* and Jimmy’s **band** on the odd occasion. Deals on drinks can be found throughout the week on gin, cocktails and prosecco so you’re certainly not troubled for choice. The place was the first in West Oxfordshire to hold painting nights where an artist brings along her easels and teaches people to paint as they make their way through a bottle of wine. The changing of seasons sees a variety of events and parties, gin and wine tastings, as well as a new cocktail menu, so you always have something exciting around the corner with this spot.

You might have to drive 5 miles for this one, or pop on a quick bus, but I promise you won’t be disappointed. Although still young and finding their feet the guys are going strong and business is always increasing. There is something special about this place and as I finish my glass and get up to go all I feel is excitement as I plan when I’ll be returning.

The Griffin

If you find yourself looking for The Best Beer, as voted by Wadsworth in 2017, then swing on by to this small and cosy pub run by husband and wife, John and Jane. John took over this 16th century pub 3 years ago which prides itself in excellent real ales and always being flooded with locals. John lives upstairs and for him the pub is his child, his pride and job. He literally never leaves. The heart and soul that goes into the place is visible in the return of regulars who have been coming here long before I was even born. It remains virtually unchanged, bar a few essential redecorations, but that’s the key to their success and they know it.

Mum and dad are on the table across enjoying Sauvignon and Becks Blue in Dad’s attempt to do Stoptober. There are young lads playing pool, old men enjoying a pint and watching the sports, a family enjoying a roast. This time I opt for dark rum and coke, no ice, which is poured by a young man who started only the day before. He’s friendly and we chat about his other job at Pizza Pilgrims whilst I wait for John.

John moved to Witney after liking the vibe of this place when he moved away from Ireland a couple years ago. There he spent 20 years in the pub and hospitality industry, even working in Mayfair for a few years until the pace of life became too much. He’s bought a bit of the Irish feel to the place, their best-selling beer being Guinness and a warm, friendly atmosphere being emitted throughout. I ask about opening times to which he responds, ‘whenever the first person’s here and the last person leaves.’

Throughout the week you’ll find live music, usually from locals, which draw in a massive cliental off all ages and backgrounds. It’s likely if you are from Witney and pop in on one of these events, you’re going to see someone you know, another testament to their popularity. They show all the live sporting events too which is rather rare in Witney and, despite John’s accountant advising him to get rid of it to cut costs, John refused because the locals wanted it. Although this is focused on where to get the best bevvy, I simply *can’t* refrain not touch upon the weekly fresh-food deals they offer of fish and chips, pizza, pies and roasts. All fantastic, all fresh and all local with the meat being supplied from Baker’s Butchers in town.

After years and years this place is still hitting the nail on the head, providing locals and those wanting an authentic Cotswold pub to experience, a place to catch up with friends over a pint, listen to some great tunes and enjoy the sport.

The Siege of Orleans

This little gem of a place is hidden behind the high street next to a car park, but it isn’t hard to find. It looks underwhelming from the outside but as soon as I step in, I’m smitten with the arty, bright and quirky interior. My eyes glisten as I spot a line-up of rums I’ve never heard of that are all eagerly awaiting me. It’s like Sophie’s choice; being offered such a vast array of rum is not a common occurrence in Witney with a town full of gin drinkers. In a fumble I choose trusty Old J Dark Spiced and boy, does it go down well. With it, a can of ‘Green Cola,’ an apparently more ethical alternative to Cola-Cola and healthier too.

Keeping to their environmental and moral ethics shows to be at the heart of this lovely place from the use of no straws, sourcing of local produce and unwillingness to compromise on these just to keep costs low and profits high. I’m led upstairs to chat to Emily, the assistant manager, who just so happens to be someone I went to Sixth Form with a few years ago, talk about small world…

Chris, the owner, opened this place four years ago predominantly as an Ale House with the philosophy that they try not to have the same thing twice or for too long. The cask ales only stay on rotation for one barrel all sourced from independent breweries with who they’ve established good relationships with over the years. Occasionally, if something is popular, they’ll reorder it in the future, but the bar operates on a one-in-one-out basis. If you’re keen to try something a bit different, love your ale and want to be educated by the staff in the process then this place will guarantee you that but don’t expect to go along as be greeted by your friendly usual Carlsberg or San Miguel because this isn’t that place. No Smirnoff or Gordons here folks, sorry not sorry!

They always have a cask ale on too and a larger which tends to change seasonally, opting for a Hawaiian company in Summer and a German one for Autumn. Within their variety of drafts ales are more permanent members of the team and perhaps more recognisable, Hobgoblin IPA from the local Wychwood brewery in Witney town centre being a firm favourite and one I’d recommend trying! They even have stamp cards and for every 4 (different) craft ales you try you get one for free. In my opinion, this is very doable if you’re spending a good few hours here and a lot more reasonable than the \*hut hum\* 10 or 16 stamp cards that some places offer.

The place is exactly as Emily describes; an attack on the senses. Bright colours, in-your face paintings made by local graffiti artists, large posters sprawled across the walls and a piano in the corner which they invite you to come and play at free will. I’m not quite sure how well I’d fare though seeing as I can only play a very poor rendition of the Harry Potter theme tune. You can also try your hand at table-tennis and the guys host various quiz nights throughout the month, open mic nights on Tuesday with artists from around the area, spoken word/musical comedy nights, poker nights on Wednesdays and so much more.

Everyone here is so friendly and happy to talk to you about what they offer, guiding you in the right direction to try something brand new that they think you’ll like if you tell them what tipple usually tickles your taste buds. There’s an energetic vibe that is radiated throughout the bar and they welcome you as one of their own. If you’re in the Witney area and want to try something completely different and maybe a little out of your comfort zone, then this is the spot or you. I know I’ll be coming back and bringing as many of my friends here. Again and again and again…

The Bell Inn

The Bell Inn is the pinnacle of what it means to be a Cotswold pub. It’s a small pub-come-b&b in the heart of the small village of Ducklington, still within the Witney realm so have no fret, you won’t need to venture far. There’s omly a couple of regulars at the bar and playing pool when I arrive, but it’s 1.00pm on a Wednesday so it’s to be expected. I vaguely recognise the manager and her son, but I don’t say anything as I can’t pinpoint where from. I’m offered a rum? Wine? Beer? Any drink I want really, on the house! Peppermint tea please.

The pub is cosy inside, though the fires not lit now it usually is when there are more people which I can only imagine goes down a treat. I sit with Leisa, the manager who took over the pub three months ago after working there for some time. The previous managers had done so and with great success for some time before retiring and, since the takeover Leisa has revamped a couple of things, keeping the pubs core values at its heart. Excellent ales, great grub and family-friendly service.

The fact that you can stay overnight invites people from far and wide, but don’t be surprised to walk in at any time of day to find someone from the local village sitting at the bar whose been coming here with his pals for years. You’ll be embraced by the pub as one too, greeted with a smile and cracking jokes as if you were only here yesterday. The place is very accomodating; dog friendly, those with dietary requirements or smaller apetities, a pick of the bunch for you who choose love gin and an even better choice for all avid ale drinkers! There are menus and discounts available for all parties (*apart from the dogs, but I think there IS biscuits!)* As Miley Cyrus might say ‘if you’re 5 or 82’ they’ll be something here for you…It’s worth mentioning that this place has a cracking menu, especially for Christmas, and on Sunday they serve up a quality old-fashioned carvery all with local produce. More about this is another post.

There are quiz nights, FIZZ FRIDAYS, live music events, seasonal parties and so much more getting people through the doors and Leisa is continuing to introduce and brainstorm ways to keep the pub exciting for all as she finds her feet, with a little help from her son’s poster-making skills of-course! Turns out I went to Primary School with him and I’m pretty sure we were girlfriend and boyfriend one afternoon aged 8, but that’s a story for another day. If you hadn’t already figured out, Witney is a small community, where everyone knows everyone and their grandmother. But we’re friendly, and I promise we’ll open our doors to you as if you were our own.

The sign on the door outside reads ‘Splendid Village Inn and Country Kitchen’ and this precisely what this place is. A warm, welcoming pub for all and upholding the image and atmosphere of what it means to be from the Cotswolds. If this is what you’re seeking, then look no further than The Bell. It really is a gem of a place that has been perfecting it’s craft and sticking to its roots for so long whilst every other place moves on to become ‘Gastropubs’ serving small portions of foam spread on a plate with caper berries and ‘deconstructed Eton-mess’ for dessert. What even is that? These guys just do what they do best, and it isn’t going to stop any time soon.

THE ANGEL INN

This small pub might look a bit run down and neglected from the outside, you might think it needs a good lick of paint or scrub down, but that’s all part of its charm. So, go on, open up the door, it’ll make a bit of a creek and the bell will ring as you step in and you may wonder what quite of place I’ve led you to…

Inside you’re probably going to find lots of men drinking pints alone, many watching the sports. There might be a group of younger lads at the back playing pool. You’ll be greeted by smiley staff and probably be a little surprised at how young they all seem working in such a seemingly old pub. You really ought to opt for a pint when you’re here and you can be sure to see all the familiars sitting behind the bar; Becks, Stella, Strongbow etc, but you should go for the Hobgoblin, it’s their best seller. Why wouldn’t it be when the Brewery is literally out the back door? Talk about local.

Despite being a 21-year old female sat alone, I don’t feel at all awkward or out of place and I stay to watch the Liverpool game. I’m not sure if anyone is expecting me today by the vibe I am getting, but the match is on at 4 so I’m one happy customer! The elderly man sat nets to me, a fellow Liverpool supporter might I add, is sat alone too and starts up conversation. Wat starts as a conversation about either team’s poor performance throughout the game evolves into a long cha all about his life story, my future goal and what it’s like living in Witney now as opposed to what it was once. He shares his advice, his mistakes and buys me a drink; I offer to buy him a pint in return, but he chuckles and tells me to save my pennies, I need them more than him. That’s the nice thing about this place, in a see of strangers you can connect with someone. It encourages newcomers to talk to the older regulars who have been coming here years. You don’t feel out of place or uncomfortable but welcomed with wide arms.

There’s live music this evening too by the same guy who runs the sessions at The Bell Inn and The Griffin *(his, name is James Morgan and hots a lot of music events in Witney and the surrounding areas, to check out what he’s got going on check out the link at the end!)* The pub also offers small nibbles of your typical bar snacks of pork scratchings, croquettes, samosas and daily soup. Larger meals are available with steaks, hearty pies and rich casseroles on offer, and perhaps a traditional pudding to finish it all off? All reasonably priced, homemade and local though nothing for me as a vegan though I haven’t asked if they’d whip anything up, but you might.

Everything about the pub shouts stereotypical of that of a quaint Oxfordshire establishment! They stick to tradition, doing what they do best and doing it well, not dressing themselves up to be something they’re not. If you want somewhere doing something that British pubs have been known to do well for so long which is pints and sports, then this is your place. I’d opt for this place to watch a game over many others and by the look of the amount of people who have been coming year for years on end, so would many others.

The Eagle Tavern

I remember visiting the Tavern with my parents as we walked home from the market on Saturdays through Winter. It was the perfect pitstop where you knew you’d always get a seat, a decent pint and that the fire would be on. Plus, with all the heavy bags of fruit and vegetables for that Sunday’s roast, it was convenient and provided the necessary energy boost. This was pre-university, pre-drinking (*AN: read rum*) days and only being ever able to get a coke or J20, the place never sparked much of an interest for me. Quite frankly, I considered it to be a dive for old men. Fast forward a few years later, and it’s one of my regular hang outs, often on a Saturday, often on the walk home. Sometimes tradition is nice.

The pub is thought to be Witney oldest pub, records dating back to 1752 and it seems as though not much has changed since. The previous owners to the ones now ran it for 15 years and became disinterested eventually, the lack of love and passion being emulated through their inability to modernise even just the tiniest bit. That’s when Paul Spink, also the owner of Fat Lils that puts on great music events, took over in April 2019 and since then has given the place a bit of TLC.

He gave it a new reputation and the love and attention it deserved making it the now very successful pub it is. A card system was introduced, a Gin Club to celebrate the plethora of unique gin they offer, dogs were invited in and a smidge of redecoration was done. The place got involved with #wearitpink this October, using their Juke Box to raise money for Breast Cancer Research and this November they’re raising money for Movember UK. The bar also hosted the World Cup Games this year and opened their doors as early as 8:15am sometimes in the torrential weather to invite people in for free bacon butties and to watch the game.

Despite the small renovation and re-gig of a few things, Paul wanted to keep the pub traditional. They’re not a gastropub, they’re not going to suddenly add new flashy lights and start serving cocktails. With the success of the pub growing and the increasing number of people walking through the door (or all ages now) on a weekend, there are some changes the owners want to introduce. A lick of paint here and there to tidy things up, maybe a few features need fixing and they’re even discussing the introduction of DIY traditional ploughman’s platters being served between 12-2pm come New Year. I’m not talking olives, hummus and burrata boards, no I’m talk old-school British snacks of pork pies, sausage rolls, cheese and meat boards. All locally sourced Paul says, but I wouldn’t expect anything less with the offers on hand around here. They’re even going to try to accommodate a variety of diets so everyone can enjoy.

This place reminds me of being home, it I go in here alone sometimes to work and read, or I drag in friends who might not of been to try my favourite Mount Gay Eclipse (which I’m forever grateful to Benny from the Tavern for introducing to me!) I highly recommend checking this spot out whilst you’re hear. It is worth noting, is isn’t child friendly though so if you have got youngers, maybe leave them at the park or the pottery painting place for an hour or so. You should also try to check out Fat Lils too which host music events pretty throughout the week and weekend, cracking themed parties throughout the year and a chilled vinyl afternoon on Sundays which are nice to wind down the weekend with.