

Hook, Lyme and sinker

By Sophy Roberts, August 2008

Lyme Regis, a small Regency resort which butts up to Devon's eastern border, is bustling with bucket-and-spade holidaymakers in the sunshine. Candy-coloured beach huts are lined up along a newly renovated promenade and children are playing on a half-moon curl of soft, cappuccino-coloured sand imported from Normandy. This is flanked by slippery green rocks where you can hunt spider crabs for a simple, suckingly good dinner. The sea is a palette of creamy turquoise and midnight blue, making it on the brightest days feel like a sliver of the Mediterranean. Yet, until now, Lyme's best fish restaurant has been nothing more fancy than the local fish-and-chip kiosk facing Lyme's iconic harbour wall, the Cobb.

It is a stroke of brilliance that chef Mark Hix should open his first out-of-London venture in this seaside town, which has been crying out for an alternative to deep-fried cod in paper. Known as Hix Oyster and Fish House, his modest 45-seat restaurant opened in mid-June. It is awkwardly positioned down the precipitous road which leads to the Cobb, along a lane overlooking a "crazy golf" course and Lyme's municipal gardens.

In spite of this, you can be fairly sure that the Hix Oyster and Fish House will be pulling in weekenders (it helps that a four-room boutique hotel and restaurant, The Abbots House, opened last month in Charmouth – among the better places to stay if you don't want to pay the headier rates of Summer Lodge, a 40-minute drive away in Evershot). This is almost inevitable. Hix was formerly chef-director of London's Le Caprice, The Ivy and Scott's, the latter being among the capital's best three fish restaurants.

Of course, Hix isn't cooking in Lyme. During the week he is engaged with The Albemarle (formerly The Grill) at Brown's Hotel in London and his other new own-name restaurant, Hix Oyster and Chop House in Smithfield. So for Lyme he has brought in Mike Barnard, a former colleague, as chef. Barnard worked for a year at The Ivy before running the kitchen in his parents' pub in nearby West Bay. And he's clearly absorbed the Hix philosophy: that less is more, and Britishness vital.

I'd heard a rumour that Hix, who is Dorset-born, was returning to his roots. I had also seen him on the train – it sometimes seems there are more celebrity chefs on the three-carriage train from Waterloo to Axminster, Lyme's station, than pensioners. For this is the route taken by Hix's new neighbour, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who last year opened two restaurants in the area. In Axminster, Fearnley-Whittingstall has Canteen at the back of his organic food store; the other location is a couple of miles outside Lyme. This is River Cottage HQ – bustling year-round with acolytes who are butchering, foraging and gorging themselves on everything from squirrel to samphire.

Hix's restaurant isn't, well, surprising. The interior is pared back with painted white wood tables and chairs, a prop-up bar and a prow-like balcony. There are walls of glass and downstairs, a chef's table seating up to six (on August 18, Hix is also launching monthly themed cookery classes, headed up by himself, followed by lunch). Management is overseen by Jonathan Jeffery, who used to work at Brindisa, the popular Spanish tapas restaurant at London's Borough Market. With attentive service even within days of opening, Jeffery ensures a slickness not unlike the universally well-liked maître d' of The Ivy, Jesus Adorno.

Hix Oyster and Fish House is equally straightforward with its menus. When you order the Cobb smoked salmon (£10.75), you get five slabs of the "Hix-cured" fish without pepper, bread or lemon – nothing but the most perfectly smoked fish imaginable.

The oysters, which cost £1.75 each, are as impressive as Scott's but Hix sources his exclusively from the West Country. There are classic Duchy Rocks, Portland Royals, and Yealm Rocks. These unusual river oysters from Devon are the smallest and fruitiest – and a revelation.

For the main, we opted for the mixed grilled fish for two (£46.50) – a generous platter of skate, sole, sea bass, scallops and lobster. The textures contrast effectively: the velvety skate, the fleshy, just-cooked sea bass and the delicately scented but succulent lobster loaded with crunchy roe. I've had better scallops in Dorset, namely at Hix's most formidable local competition, the relaxed and knowingly rough-and-ready Crab House Café located on the Fleet oyster lagoon, a 40-minute drive east down the same stretch of coast.

We matched the main with a well-priced Galician white (£28.50 for the bottle) and a side order of heritage tomatoes in every shade of red, purple and yellow.

We could have opted for a showier dish, like the Lyme Bay fish soup with Julian Temperley's cider brandy (£6.50). But such exotica is limited, Hix's menu letting the exclusively British ingredients speak seductively of themselves. A whole crab with mayonnaise (£15), mackerel with green tomato salad (£10.75), John Dory with rosemary (19.75) – nothing about these entrées fight the lure of a just-caught, well-sourced fish, cooked simply and classically. And this is where the local boy's done good – remembering that in a Dorset seaside town, you're catering to straight-talking folk who don't have time for poncy cooking. Hence his pollack fish fingers with mushy peas and chips (£13.75), and for dessert, that extraordinary "Perry jelly" with berries and vanilla ice-cream (£6.75) which helped secure Hix's success on the recent television series *Great British Menu*.

The only thing he hasn't got is high chairs – which, bearing in mind the family market in a seaside town, could be risky. But I imagine few will complain. I visited with my children and came out thinking that Hix had come up trumps, delivering a West Country seaside restaurant to rival John Burton Race at the New Angel in Dartmouth, and Rick Stein's fishy empire in Padstow.

[Hix Oyster and Fish House](#), Cobb Road, Lyme Regis, Dorset; tel: +44 (0)1297 446910.

A three-course meal for two is around £80, excluding wine. Open for lunch and dinner daily (except Mondays).