

In "The French Lieutenant's Woman," [Meryl Streep](#) looks longingly out to sea from the Cobb, the historic harbor wall at Lyme Regis, on England's southwest coast.

If only she'd turned and looked to her left, she'd have seen the hillside on which stands [Hix Oyster & Fish House](#), the coastal outpost of chef [Mark Hix](#)'s London restaurant, where tables can be as hard to find as lost lovers and Oscar-winning movie roles.

"I couldn't get a table in my own restaurant," Hix says of Hix Oyster & Chop House, the Smithfield eatery where celebrities such as the artist [Tracey Emin](#) jostle with civilians to try dishes such as rabbit brawn terrine. "I had a wine grower coming from New Zealand and I tried for a week. It was embarrassing."

Diners who are unable to snag a table or who prefer to get out of London now have the option of trying the new venue, which quietly opened a few weeks ago. It serves mainly fish dishes as well as Hix favorites such as fruit jelly with vanilla ice cream.

Hix is standing at the bar, chatting with staff as I finally reach the place after a journey of more than three hours from London by train and taxi. He opens a bottle of Burrow Hill Perry, a sparkling dry pear drink similar to cider, and talks of his problems in obtaining supplies of fresh fish for a seaside venue.

"I had Portland Shellfish on the phone, saying it was difficult to deliver here," he says, pointing out across Lyme Bay in the direction of the supplier. "Logistically, everything goes to London. It's easier to get fish in London."

Ivy, Caprice

Hix, 45, is best known as the former chef-director of [Caprice Holdings Ltd.](#), which owns fashionable London restaurants including the Ivy, the Caprice, Scott's and J. Sheekey, as well as for books such as "British Regional Food." He's also known for developing friendships with suppliers and getting the best British produce.

He produces a plate of pan-fried sand eels in the lightest of batters. They have an intense taste of the sea.

"No one will eat them around here," says Hix, who was born near Lyme Regis. "They use them as bait for sea bass. It's like oysters. You won't find them served in restaurants around here."

He then produces a plate of oysters the size of your fist. He has Devon Yealms and Portland Royals on the menu at 1.75 pounds (\$3.48) apiece. Starters include fat pilchards on toast with tomatoes and wild marjoram; seashore salad with mussels, scallops, clams, crab and an oyster with sea greens; and pan-fried Dean Barton duck's egg with summer girolles mushrooms.

Hix's London restaurant has come under critical fire as the kind of place diners get good service if they are a friend of Hixxy, as he's known, and can have trouble getting a drink if not.

Champagne, Schmoozing

“That's not true: I make a point of talking to customers I don't need to schmooze,” Hix says. (But he then adds that he's had poor service there himself, which isn't entirely reassuring.) On cue, a boy walks up asking him to sign one of his cookbooks for his mum's birthday and Hix insists on visiting her at her table.

Still, lots of people do want to be his mates. The terrace of his seaside restaurant on a sunny Saturday quickly fills with friends with Sloane Ranger accents, drinking champagne and rose, rolling cigarettes, discussing a planned fishing trip and dropping names like Damien (Hirst) faster than you can swallow an oyster.

It's seductive and feels like the [Groucho Club](#) in exile. That's not so surprising, as Hix is a regular at that London media and showbiz hangout. Mary-Lou Sturridge -- after whom a club room is named -- is planning to open a hotel along the coast. But Hix knows it's locals he needs if he is to fill his restaurant, especially in the winter.

Local Produce

Fortunately, the food is wonderful, thanks to Hix's connections and his focus on provenance. There's Dorset blue lobster grilled with chips or cold with salad; dived Dartmouth scallops with garlic and parsley butter, or pollack fish fingers with mushy peas and chips. Desserts include fantastic New Forest berries and a mousse with more chocolate than Willy Wonka.

The restaurant itself is surprisingly modest in appearance, like a B&Q pine conservatory with large windows looking out onto a mini-golf course and two table-tennis tables if you peep down. Cast your gaze toward the horizon and you'll enjoy the majestic sweep of the bay. You might feel you're in the south of France after a few bottles of Chateau de Fonscolombe 2007 rose.

Try scuttling back to Axminster for the long train journey back to London and you may feel a little less in love with the world, but it is worth the trip.

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