

## Making waves: Hix Oyster & Fish House

Reviewed by John Walsh  
*Saturday, 9 August 2008*

You couldn't accuse Mark Hix of resting on his laurels. Running hell for leather on his laurels, more like. Since he parted company with Caprice Holdings, owners of Scott's and The Ivy, barely a year ago, he's now opened three restaurants. It's true that in one of them – The Albemarle in Brown's Hotel off Piccadilly – he was more overseeing grandee than chef-proprietor. But in the other two, Hix Oyster & Chop House, and this fish house under review, along with money he has clearly invested his heart and soul. This man is unstoppable.

Mr Hix hails from West Bay in Dorset, part of the "Jurassic Coast" where trippers spend afternoons hunting for stegosaurus fossils. After 25 years in London, he has elected to launch a restaurant close to where he started life. He was looking around West Bay, it seems, when he got a phone call from Carl Salter, an acquaintance in Lyme Regis. He was, Carl said, re-doing his restaurant in the Lister Gardens which was forced to close for three years while the gardens were being re-landscaped to discourage night walkers from toppling off the edge. Would Mark be interested in buying it?

There's nothing fossilised about the place. A path from Lyme High Street leads you down towards the harbour, the sandy beach (imported from France) and the serpentine promenade of The Cobb, where Louisa Musgrove broke her ankle in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, and where the French Lieutenant's Woman stood gazing out to sea. Halfway down the pathway, you look up to your right and see a gleaming pavilion, all wood and glass, jutting out on a platform.

Inside, it's as light and simple as a greenhouse: white tables and chairs, oak beams and floorboards. Windows occupy two walls and overlook Lyme Bay, stretching as far east as Portland Bill. There's an observation deck outside, where you can sniff the bladderwrack while savouring your "Hix Fix" cocktail. After months of reviewing London restaurants, I found it a vision of Paradise.

There's no R in August so technically one should steer clear of oysters, but it would have been perverse to ignore the house speciality. Hix offers two kinds, Yealms and Duchy of Cornwall. We tried both. The Duchy oysters were unusually creamy, offsetting their briny tang with slithery richness. Yealms were larger, bordering on the colossal, and tasted slightly sweet. Sweet oysters? An oyster shell offered chopped shallots in vinegar, but the bivalves needed absolutely no accompaniment. Apart, perhaps, from the plate of tempura samphire – battered, salty and slightly greasy – which the chef was offering gratis, to see if anyone liked it. Yes one certainly did, chef.

"Lyme Bay Fish fish soup with Julian Temperley's cider brandy" was a variant of Hix's sublime fish soup at Brown's Hotel; densely textured from an unimaginably complicated stock, it was magical and deeply satisfying (though I could have done with an extra slug of the cider brandy). Deep-fried monkfish cheeks with caper mayonnaise, another Hix favourite, didn't impress my companion, who pronounced them "a bit like fish balls – rather hard and chewy". As we prepared to come to blows over this toothsome starter, the moon emerged from behind a cloud and cast a shining path from sea to harbour; suddenly, the consistency of monkfish didn't seem worth arguing about.

Hix has told the local press that his new eaterie would be "a no-frills restaurant, serving simply prepared, locally landed fish". A fine ambition, though it leaves you wondering how an ambitious chef can stamp his personality on the finny raw material. I was still wondering that when my John Dory arrived – a little too simply prepared. It's a staggeringly ugly fish, with its big head, baleful eye and flared nostrils, and needed five minutes of patient beheading and de-boning before I reached the rosemary-scented flesh. I wished the kitchen had filleted the thing and served it with a sauce. My companion's lemon sole, by contrast, was a thing of utter beauty, cooked to perfection, a light ochre glow over the supple white flesh suggesting the presence, in the kitchen, of a flour duster and a very superior griddle pan.

Among the puddings was Mr Hix's prize-winning "perry jelly", a round pear-jelly bracelet with some bracingly tart berries suspended inside. A chocolate mousse, scattered with a deconstructed Flake bar, was fine, but by then I was groaning with excess. Mr Hix has returned to his Dorset roots with great style. Describing his approach to cooking as "no frills" is a little disingenuous for the south-coast Escoffier, but sourcing such excellent ingredients from his own backyard has clearly put a spring in his step. Will there be a headline in the Dorset Echo saying: Local Boy Makes Good?

*Hix Oyster & Fish House, Lister Gardens, Lyme Regis, Dorset (01297 446910)*

Food ★★★★★

Ambience ★★★★★

Service ★★★★★

*Around £120 for two, with wine*