

Sunday Times – Style Magazine
Rachel Johnson

Cobb Road, Lyme Regis; 01297 446910. Lunch, Tue-Thu, noon-2.30pm, Fri-Sun, noon-3pm; dinner, Tue-Thu, 6.30pm-10pm; Fri-Sun, 6pm-10pm

I've always assumed that there's some culinary quadratic equation that explains why the further you drive from London, the more beautiful the landscape becomes and the uglier and more depressing most of the restaurant scene. In some areas, if it's mum's night off — unlikely, I know, but for the sake of argument let's say it's mum's night off — then the old man can only take the lady wife to one of three hostleries: the all-you-can-eat £4.99 Chinese buffet, the dire Italian place, or the plasticky pub on a busy A road with all the advertised attributes to make any woman's heart sink. En Suites. Sunday Roasts. And Carvery.

Well, Dorset isn't like that. Dorset is the foodie hub of the shires, and the cradle, if not the birthplace, of some of our best-known, best-loved public-school chefs, the sort of place where women with defiantly grey hair clutching their bags for life in gardening-roughened hands talk about their Agas and heritage flour and bottle their own hips and haws jam, while terriers yap at their feet.

Dorset is so foodie that — to give you one example — the nicest, most beautiful girl in my year at Oxford threw it all in to become a West Country cheesemaker. Another boy in my year, who grew up in Dorset eating off hedgerows and shooting rabbits for the pot, who shared my digs and energetically used a Kitchen Aid blender minus lid, was so into cooking that after university he went off to work at the River Café and now, whenever you turn on Channel 4, he is compassionately slaughtering an old spot, wild-haired in bobbly jersey and green wellies. In Dorset. And he has the look in his eye I remember from when he used to hurl the used dinner plates out of the window into the front garden rather than washing them up, the look of love that says: "Unbelievable. I'm living the dream, I'm farming in the deep southwest, growing my own and feeding my family and cooking."

With him, the money and telly are only the icing on the cake, so it was out of respect to my old mucker that I kicked off my day on the Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall Heritage Trail at Axminster. This is where the River Cottage HQ has relocated, and — I'm sorry, Hugh — it is hard, at first glance anyway, to see why. As we drove through, passing the horrid hamburger joints, winos and derelict industrial buildings on the high street and a sign that read "Home of fine carpets since 1755", my husband commented, "Another ruined English country town, I see."

I was quite excited to discover that Axminster boasts a coin-operated dog wash called Metro Dogs, where you insert your furry friend into a sort of contraption and he comes out looking all soft and curly and pampered, like the actor Alan Davies, all for 10 quid. But that was about all I was excited by. And I couldn't even wash my bitch up because I was in a hurry — I had to shop the River Cottage HQ and then get to Hix Oyster & Fish House, our exciting seaside lunch destination, in Lyme Regis.

There is a restaurant at the RCHQ where a wall is devoted to a mural of Dorset and surrounding counties, flagging up the hundreds of food producers that supply River Cottage (an empire that marches on its stomach), so I managed to buy some Dorset Knob biscuits from Morcombelake, those pellets that shatter and skid across the room when you put a knife to them, some Godminster cheddar from Bruton, and some Kernow chocolate, before my husband came back and announced in a carrying voice to all Hugh's customers that "they'd seen me coming", that he was very disappointed with the church because there was a "horrid happy-clappy service going on", and telling me to please get a move on, as we had to get to the Jurassic coast.

Hix Oyster & Fish House, Cobb Road, Lyme Regis, Dorset — this must be the most romantic address and breathtaking location of any restaurant in Dorset, or indeed, the whole of England. Yes, it was a day of pearly luminescence, with the spring sun bouncing off plump green hills and sheer cliffs, with seagulls wheeling in the sky and the sea a soft, sheeny blue, and everything looks better in the sunshine. But the restaurant is perched on a steep hill above the Cobb and has a deck like the prow of a ship, complete with prow and flagpole, where you can sit and sip Manzanilla, and slip the sea down your throat while watching the fishing smacks chug in and out, and the toddlers paddle in the strand below. It is impossible not to feel a faint twinge of wellbeing.

Our oyster count was three Helford River, six Portland Royal and four Colchester, but I'd also greedily ordered the baked spider crab starter (£12.75, more than enough for two). Sitting at the bar on the poop deck, screening out the mini-golf off the port bow and the teenagers snogging under the prow, waiting for the Macon Blanc to arrive, dipping the home-made white bread thickly spread from a pat of cheesy yellow butter into the crab shell — well, this was about as good as it gets.

I was sighing with pleasure in expectation of my main course — a generous-fleshed whole sea bream with bright green sauce, plus meaty, rosemary-roasted jerusalem artichokes — when the ship's captain, Mark Hix, clad in a battered T-shirt saying Applecrumble & Fish on it, wandered over. Soon his front of house man, Jonny, brought him fish and chips and minted pea purée. My hand stole towards his fat yellow fries as I hoped against hope that he would offer me one of his lethally famous cocktails, called the Hix fix. If he did, see, I'd got what I was going to say all planned out. My friend Alexa had two of them and keeled over, so I was going to say, "Chicks nix Hix fix", a brilliant-though-I-say-so reworking of the Variety headline that declared country folk fed up with films about rural life (Sticks nix hick pix).

Unfortunately, Mark didn't offer me a Hix fix, but Jonny gave us a roll-up apiece after my husband had polished off his scallops with parsley, so I couldn't complain. Apparently folks come from London and Bristol to sit on his deck and shoot the breeze, eat oysters and gaze out to sea, and picture Meryl Streep, cowed and wind-lashed and pinchy-nosed, on the Cobb. Valentine Warner, Rick Stein, Tom Parker Bowles, Caroline Conran and other Dorset nobs, including the aforementioned Hugh, like it here, and I can see why. It's small, sunny, simple and seasonal, and above all Hix knows that the best way to cook and serve fish is to buy the best, the freshest there is, and leave well alone.

So on a fine day, preferably with a cold glass of white burgundy in your hand and oysters on their way, you can see hope from up here. You can see the future. Yes, just give it a couple of hours at Mark Hix's crab shack on the Jurassic coast, and it really does seem as if everything is going to be all right after all.

AA Gill is away