

Restaurant review: Giles Coren at Hix Oyster & Chop House

The former executive chef of the ivy and author of *British Regional Food* has created a culinary triumph in Farringdon



Giles Coren

Hix Oyster & Chop House

I had this idea that it might be fun in future always to take a famous TV comedian with me when I go out to review a restaurant. I've made about as many jokes about food now as I think I can – the well is finally dry – and I thought perhaps a bit of professional input might breathe fresh life into this jaded page.

Obviously, I'm talking about posh comedians. I don't want to sit there with Jim Davidson pulling ungo-bongo faces whenever a black person gets up to go to the loo, or have Russell Brand slipping off every six minutes to nail another waitress to the lavatory wall.

So I started by taking Alexander Armstrong, out of Armstrong and Miller, to the Glasshouse in Kew. A stout fellow, Xander: Cambridge-educated, beautifully spoken, father of one, fearless wearer of tank tops. About as likely to embarrass his host in a posh restaurant as David Niven.

And indeed he was beautifully behaved. So well-behaved that I forgot to mention in the review (published a fortnight ago) that he was there. So that didn't work. So then I took Al Murray to the Ritz because there's been a refurb and they'd launched a spring menu that everyone was raving about, and I thought it might be funny, you know: the Pub Landlord at the Ritz and all that. And he's an Oxbridge man too, and the former head boy of his school to boot, so very little chance of his letting the side down, etiquette-wise.

But there was a horrid, snooty French waiter ("nul points" for smiling) who corrected Al's pronunciation of "scallop" (Al is a "scollop" man) and then absolutely refused to tell us whether the chateaubriand Henri IV referred to his Henry IV or our Henry IV, refused to smile at the suggestion that if they put a chateaubriand Henry V on the menu, gentlemen in England now a-bed would think themselves accursed they were not here, and even refused to tell us what the Henri IV treatment implied ("Eet ees cooked on a plate with vegetables"), and so I began to lose interest in reviewing them.

And then Al's roasted rack of organic lamb (from the "Ritz Traditions" menu) came thoroughly cooked through, even though he'd asked for it pink. And the vegetables on the side were pretty dreary. And the seasonal starters, though highly accomplished, were diddified to the point of being fit only for old ladies – of whom, luckily, there was no shortage in the room. Yes, it is a very beautiful room. But it's just so big and over the top it feels like you're eating in Raine Spencer's hairdo.

The service, Frenchy aside, was Twenties cruise-ship slick (a champagne order materialised in no more than 14 seconds, glasses of iced water were kept seamlessly brimming) and I had a great veal chop. But one great veal chop in a famous hotel doth not a review sustain.

There was one moment when I might still have gone for a full review, though, just after Al walked into the hotel's Rivoli bar and asked the barman for a Virgin Mary. Had that barman turned to his colleague and shouted, "Something fruit-based for the lady!", I'd have obviously had to run with the piece. But he didn't. Presumably because he was Polish, and knows nothing of the Pub Landlord. And anyway Polish ladies drink giant tankards of lager.

As Al and I went our separate ways on Piccadilly and I began planning my next comedian-led review, I had a thought. "Don't tell David Baddiel about this," I said to Al. And he promised not to.

You see, David is an absolute sucker for posh. He loves it. The bigger and pricier and smarter the better (it's down, he tells me, to growing up in a lower middle-class Jewish household where his mother's signature dish was an enormous vat of water flavoured with a single rancid chicken claw). I think I last took him on a review to Bentley's, which he had finally accepted after first rejecting at least a dozen rather more budget-sounding suggestions from me. It's like taking the Queen out: you have to send a list of possible venues and he comes back with the one he thinks sounds flashiest. Sometimes he vetoes the lot. He won't stir from his Hampstead eyrie unless the staff are in bow-ties (although he is as likely as not to arrive in his cycling kit), rare things have been killed, and the change out of a three-hundred-pound note will be in coppers. If he got wind that he'd been overlooked on a Ritz trip, there might be trouble.

I was able, however, to lure him down to Hix Oyster & Chop House in humble Farringdon on the assurance that the place was a first eponymous venture for Mark Hix, the former executive chef of the Ivy and its glitzy satellites, the author of the highly influential *British Regional Food*, and the undisputed king of great British produce. And also that it was "very much the place to be seen this week".

And very much the place to eat, too. The place is an absolute triumph. Hixy has walked in to the old Rudland & Stubbs site on Greenhill Rents, clicked his magic fingers and, in a flash, unified the two – previously irreconcilable – idioms of modern British cooking: the ballsy, pared-down, offal-heavy reflection of the terroir of the British Isles (never done better over the past ten years than at Fergus Henderson's St John in Clerkenwell), and the slick, elegant, shellfish and champagne style of Bentley's, Scott's or J. Sheekey.

Even walking in you become aware of the hybrid. It has the white-washed seriousness of St John but without the schoolroom clatter and mild discomfort. There's some dark wood, thoughtful lighting, people at the bar, a little bit of open-kitchen action for shellfish in the corner, a mirror-written Tracey Emin profanity on the wall, and a mirror so you can read it.

And the food rocks. We ate from a bowl of gull's eggs (black-headed gulls, not Brighton bin-rummagers) that were boiled till the yolk was just thinking about firming up, and then chilled hard. With great hollandaise and home-made celery salt. Shell them yourself for a fiver an egg. Not cheap, so I had only three. But it's a change from bread.

And then a slab of cold rabbit brawn terrine (mostly paw and pig trotter, just a tiny bit of head, all stacked in aspic); a soft-boiled Gladys May duck egg with lewdly engorged St Enodoc asparagus soldiers, whose swollen buds lean in and suck up the orange yolk like greedy brontosaurus; a salad of shaved raw asparagus with sweet wood sorrel, fatted out with creamy Gorwydd Caerphilly; and a

little plate of the salmon Hix smokes in his own back garden, just round the corner, cut thick, quite dry so that the fishy fats melt in your mouth without cloying, and with a cool woody flavour. (I'm conflating two visits here, by the way, I didn't eat all this in one go – I went back for dinner with a couple of dolly birds a week later to get the evening buzz, which is a good one.)

And then a four mutton chop curry, meaty-slick but sometimes crunchy with fried spiced onions, and so sweet and spicy-hot you'd think a grand old ram was singed by lightning while bathing in treacle and chilli. The best curry I've ever had. A mixed grill of spring lamb with all its liver and kidneys and sweetbreads and the sweet, sweet softness of its fat. There was also a juicy Kilravock pork chop with grilled kidney, and David had some of the 28-day aged Aberdeenshire beef, ignoring Mark's suggestion of the hanger steak (£12.75) because it was "too cheap" and going for the sirloin on the bone (£24.50) instead, which was tender and juicy and just expensive enough.

The puddings look good; I tried only the excellent Jersey creamed rice with prunes. The wine list is fun. The staff are nice. And one of the waitresses is just knock-out. I cannot think of a place I'd rather eat just now.

Hix Oyster & Chop House 35-37 Greenhill Rents, Cowcross Street, London EC1 (020-7017 1930)

Meat: 10

Cooking: 9

Smiling: 8

Score: 9

Price: £100 for two, including booze and the rest.

The Ritz Restaurant Ritz Hotel, Piccadilly, London W1 (020-7493 8181)

Meat: 9

Cooking: 5

Smiling: 4 (some of the waiters were charming and smiley, just not Frenchy)

Score: 6

Price: £140 for two, not including booze.