

THE WORLD IS HIX'S OYSTER, FAY MASCHLER



Actors want their name in lights. Most chefs are happy just to see it above a restaurant door. Seeing HIX in large letters on the façade of what was formerly Rudland & Stubbs, near Smithfield Market, made me think what a long time it has been in coming.

Mark Hix may not be a name that London restaurant-goers necessarily conjure with but they have almost certainly eaten his food. For the past 17 years Hix worked for Caprice Holdings, joining when Chris Corbin and Jeremy King re-invented Le Caprice and going on to be involved in the opening of The Ivy and J Sheekey and then — when Caprice Holdings was bought by the first of its new owners — becoming chef-director of the group with responsibility also for Daphne's BamBou and Pasha. Most recently, Hix was the person behind the impeccable British fish menu for the highly successful relaunch of Scott's.

Understanding what it is people want when they go out to eat could be said to be flagrantly exemplified by the food at Le Caprice and The Ivy but Hix has more recently refined his game. His passion, apparent in one of his cookery books, *British Regional Food* (Quadrille £14.99), is the search for fine traditional produce and appropriate, time-honoured ways of treating it. This needn't result in theme-park eating; it can be funky, as was proved when five years ago Hix opened Rivington Grill in Shoreditch — later sold to Caprice Holdings.

Hix Oyster and Chop House aims to invoke London dining in the 18th century when oysters were food of the people and meat was unaffectedly cooked on the bone. Oysters are no longer cheap but their succulence and saltiness can be utilised in economic quantity, as happens at Hix in the triumphant dish of beef shin, porter and oyster pie in suet pastry with a crisply crumbed oyster riding on top (£12.75).

We ate on the last day of a month with an R in it, so two of the party were able to share a plate of Colchester Rocks, Lindisfarne oysters, Duchy of Cornwall Specials and Duchy of Cornwall Natives. Before they arrived, Mark Hix brought over some slices of smoked salmon which he had smoked in his own back garden in De Beauvoir Town. He was dressed in unsullied chef's whites. The head chef is Stuart Tattersall, whom I last saw at Stanza in Shaftesbury Avenue scattering his culinary pearls before, if not swine, then cocktail-drinking customers seemingly uninterested in the provenance of a lettuce. Pennywort salad with Little Wallop goat's cheese, beets and pickled walnuts, another Hix first course, would, I

imagine, have interested them not at all.

We loved gull's eggs, cooked judiciously to the point where the yolk had not completely set, served with celery salt and unctuous, obviously homemade mayonnaise; St Enodoc asparagus veiled in butter and set on an antique asparagus tray, once the property of The Savoy, on a folded tea-towel; fried skate knobs (panko crumbs) with caper mayonnaise. On the list which, never deviating from seasonality, changes each day were also River Severn eelers cooked Gloucestershire style (with fatty bacon and beaten eggs), their £35 price reflecting a scarcity these days, and St George's mushrooms accompanied by Welsh onion cake.

In the main course, two of us shared a roasted Woolley Park Farm free-range chicken served with wild garlic sauce. The busy outdoor life of the birds at this Bradford-on-Avon farm really does impact on their flavour. I can't remember a chicken tasting better since my childhood. Which was a long time ago. Asking for a side order of chips resulted in a metal pail filled with the crispest possible pommes allumettes. A lettuce heart salad would have been more rewarding made from that floppy variety often called English and not Little Gem. Mutton chop curry had an 18th-century ring to it but a 21st-century understanding of how to use freshly ground spices in a sauce which reverberated with flavour. Wiltshire bacon chop with laverbread (seaweed) and cockles had too many salty elements to result in a balanced plateful. "Laverbread is extremely nutritious," I said to my friend Dee, but it did not make her stop feeling that she had drawn the short straw in the meal and wishing she had ordered steak. You might not think the school dinner dish of rhubarb and custard (Jersey creamed rice with prunes is also offered) could provide consolation but it was so beautifully cooked that it did. Buttermilk drop scones with East London honey and honeycomb ice cream was also much appreciated.

It was early days at Hix's new place. Chefs Claude Bosi, from Hibiscus, and Anthony Demetre, from Arbutus and Wild Honey, were at one table, a fellow restaurant critic at another. A kind of stew of noise was a problem in the tiled, bare-boarded premises originally a sausage factory but that can be fixed. At last Mark Hix has put his name to a restaurant — and it is eminently deserving of it.