

If opening a quality chop house is as easy as Mark Hix makes it look, why aren't more people doing it?

**Hix Oyster & Chop House, 36-37 Greenhill Rents, Cowcross Street, London EC1,
Tel: 020 7017 1930**

Reviewed by Terry Durack
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Owner Mark Hix says: 'London seemed to be missing a real meaty restaurant' © Mark Chilvers

All around me, people are doing something you don't see them do much these days: they're chewing. That's the thing about a chop house: pretty much everything is cooked on the bone; this is not easy, soft, luxurious, mishy-mushy food, but muscular, workaday food that rewards you with plenty of flavour. Tough times call for tough food.

Since the mid-18th century, cash-strapped Londoners have turned to the chop house for a hearty meal at a decent price. So a brand-new one is a timely move, especially when it has been opened by one of London's most talented and affable chefs, former chef-director of The Ivy, Le Caprice and Scott's, Mark Hix.

Its timeliness also makes me very happy, because it is week two of my new leaner, budget-friendly reviews, and this fits perfectly into my £80-for-two or bust strategy. Most of the starters here are around £7 and many of the mains are £13, with rock oysters democratically offered by the piece at £1.75 each.

If you would rather go for broke, you can have River Severn elvers in their short season for £35, fillet cooked on the bone for £28.50, and a Ribero del Duero 1996 Vega Sicilia Unico for £195 – but the point is, you don't have to, which is quite a relief.

Hix's Choppy, just around the corner from fellow flesh-peddler St John, is a warm and woody space that feels reassuringly like a chop house. The plain, unpretentious room is

dominated by a long wooden bar lined with stools, and worn wooden railings define the split-level dining and open oyster serverly.

Good bread and English butter arrive on a wooden plank to accompany lightly smoked De Beauvoir salmon, cured by Hix with molasses and salt, and thickly sliced into satisfyingly oily fingers. A salted ox cheek and green bean salad (£6.25) is a hearty dish piled up in a wooden bowl, the meat like chunky salt beef, the beans squeaky, the dressing mustardy, while a glistening slab of brawn fashioned from jellied pig's trotter and wild rabbit (£7.25) is lightened with a little pea shoot and fresh pea salad. It's the sort of real, simple food that makes me ache with longing.

The wine list is also perfectly hospitable, with plenty of porter, stout and cider in case you are not tempted by Berrys' Good Ordinary Claret at £18.50, or a decent 2006 Alain Chatoux Beaujolais for £24.50 with your deep-fried haddock and potato cakes, whole grilled turbot, and pork chops with grilled kidneys.

The one thing not cooked on the bone is a crimson-fleshed hanger steak (£12.75) – known for its deep flavour and bit of a chew – which is served with a garlicky crumbed bone marrow instead. Meanwhile, a Wiltshire "bacon chop" is teamed with mossy laverbread and a ladleful of fleshy cockles (£12.75) – not a traditional pairing but an instinctive one.

Jersey creamed rice and Bakewell pudding beckon, but a simple buttermilk drop scone topped with tart rhubarb and a hugely delectable honeycomb ice-cream (£6.75) gets hoovered up in no time at all.

Hix seems to love being in restaurants, whether cooking or eating in them, and tonight he happily cruises the room, stopping to chat to those he knows, and those he doesn't. The former outnumber the latter and include a fair proportion of local food gentry, including rocker-turned-cheesemaker Alex James, food writer Tom Parker Bowles, food photographer Jason Lowe and Providores chef Peter Gordon. They all look pretty happy.

I know I am. Something within us recognises when food is perfectly of its time and place, rather than imported, forced, contrived or modified. Hix makes it look natural and easy – but if it were this easy, why can't more people pull it off? I'm just thankful that he has chosen to put his knowledge, passion and skill into a restaurant that can be all things to all people, instead of a few things to some.

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SCORES: 1-9 STAY HOME AND COOK 10-11 NEEDS HELP 12 OK 13 PLEASANT ENOUGH 14 GOOD 15 VERY GOOD 16 CAPABLE OF GREATNESS 17 SPECIAL, CAN'T WAIT TO GO BACK 18 HIGHLY HONOURABLE 19 UNIQUE AND MEMORABLE 20 AS GOOD AS IT GETS

Hix Oyster & Chop House, 36-37 Greenhill Rents, Cowcross Street, London EC1, tel: 020 7017 1930. Lunch Sun-Fri; Dinner Mon-Sat. Around £80 for two, including wine and service