

Restaurants: Hix Oyster & Chop House

Reviewed by Tracey MacLeod
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I recently heard about this talented young chef who has just left a large restaurant group to start his own fledgling venture, and ... oh all right, let's just get this over with. Mark Hix, this magazine's revered food writer, and former executive chef of the Ivy, Caprice and Scott's, has opened his own restaurant. As you'll well know, because he's been writing about it in his column for the last however many weeks. And since every other reviewer from every other non-Hix-blessed newspaper is descending on it, it seemed crazy not to give his new place a bit of a shake-down. But just because Hix is home team (See! I'm not even going to refer to him as Mark...) doesn't mean I won't bring to bear all the fearless independence that you'd expect from The Independent.

That name for example: Hix Oyster and Chop House. Shouldn't it be Hix's? See what happens when we let him out without a sub-editor? And what's so clever about reviving the idea of the 18th-century chop house, serving British meat on the bone, with a supporting cast of oysters of all persuasions, plus the kinds of regional ingredients and forgotten dishes Hix writes about so evocatively in his award-winning column ... oops, sorry, the whole independent thing slipped a bit there, didn't it?

Anyway, after nearly 20 years working as chef, and latterly chef-director, for the high-end Caprice Holdings group, Hix has done the equivalent of chucking out his business suit and tie and slipping into a comfy T-shirt – not that he has ever been spotted in a suit and tie. His new HQ is a modest dining-room, tucked away near Smithfield meat market, with creamy tiled walls, wood-panelled partitions and crisply naped tables. Round the edges of this standard-issue City-boy refit, though, Hix's arty leanings and quirky eye for culinary history playfully intrude. Water is brought to the table in old pub whisky jugs; the sturdy, scuffed silverware and vegetable dishes have been rescued from some of Britain's finest hotels (bought in sales; he doesn't nick them), the noble marble-topped bar – preserved from the room's previous incarnation as old-time fish restaurant Rudland & Stubbs – is lined with weird liquors from his travels. And imported from the Rivington, the Shoreditch canteen Hix founded then sold on to his old employers, the cheeky neon sign which spells out, in mirror writing, an obscenity that certainly wouldn't have been allowed on the walls of Scott's.

In the hope of visiting incognito, I dug out one of the disguises I keep for such occasions – that of a slightly dishevelled fortysomething woman experiencing a summer wardrobe crisis – but my cover was soon penetrated by Hix, who is a very present figure on the floor (or more specifically, by the bar) of his new gaff. With his kitchen under the command of Stuart Tattersall, ex- of Stanza, Hix looks slightly surprised to emerge blinking into the daylight in this front-of-house role, half mein host, half mole.

As one of the best-connected chefs in London, he has had no problems filling his reservations book with famous names from the worlds of food and art, plus high-rolling fans from his time at Caprice Holdings. There were reports of overbooking and mild chaos in the first week but all was calm when a colleague and I visited for lunch a couple of weeks in.

As only two of us were lunching, we couldn't do justice to a daily changing menu that reads as temptingly as Hix's recipes, and showcases many of the same passions. Here are the truly seasonal ingredients – young pea shoots, the first Cornish asparagus, to be dipped like soldiers into a soft-boiled Gladys May duck egg, Jersey Royals and wild St George's mushrooms. Reworked versions of forgotten British dishes include mutton-chop curry, Welsh onion cake and water souchet, a local version of soupe de poissons. Hix looks kindly upon unfavoured cuts of meat – he's particularly proud of the hanger steak, or onglet, which appears here with baked bone marrow. Like many of his dishes, it could sit comfortably on the menu at nearby St John. Maybe he and Fergus Henderson should have launched as a joint venture and called it St Mark?

Having followed in print Mark's, sorry, Hix's, experiments with the miniature smoke house at the bottom of his garden, it was good to try his home-smoked salmon, cured in sea salt and molasses, and smoked over oak and apple wood, leaving it with a dry texture and intense flavour. We also liked rabbit brawn, a loose-textured terrine combining rabbit and pig's trotter in a garlicky gelée; served with pungent grain mustard and a pea-shoot salad. Fried skate knobs, crisp to the bite, juicy inside, were just what you always hope fried fish will be, "scampi for grown-ups", as my guest observed. Less impactful was a salad of dandelion leaves, goat's cheese and red and golden beets, to which some wet pickled walnuts added little beyond a vaguely slimey texture.

The Chop House is, in its creator's own words, "a real meaty restaurant", and many of the dishes on the menu, including the beef flank and oyster pie and various cuts of 28-day-aged Aberdeenshire beef, didn't seem that attractive on a roasting summer day. But my guest set about his substantial pork chop with gusto; glazed with molasses before grilling, it had a subtle sweetness; the accompanying grilled kidney, skewered with a sprig of rosemary, was skilfully cooked. My main course, inspired by a family recipe from Hix's Lancastrian grandmother, was a kind of fried fish sandwich, comprising a succulent piece of pollock between two slices of potato, deep-fried in cider batter. It was terrific; Grannie would be proud.

Simple presentation and trencherman portions are what you expect from a place calling itself a chop house, and only our shared pudding bore traces of a cheffier hand; in a slightly girly arrangement of honeycomb ice-cream encircled by Yorkshire rhubarb on a buttermilk drop scone. Tasted great, though.

So there it is. Hix is a bit of a food hero in his low-key way; his approach has been hugely influential, and many of the ingredients and dishes he first championed in these pages are making their way into the wider restaurant repertoire, and even on to the supermarket shelves. They're certainly showcased brilliantly at the Chop House. It's enough to make any Brit who cares about food proud, whether or not they happen to reside a few pages down the way from its very clever owner. Got to do something about those pickled walnuts, though, Mark.

Hix Oyster & Chop House

36 Greenhill Rents, Cowcross Street, London EC1(020-7017 1930)

Food ★★★★★

Ambience ★★★★★

Service ★★★★★

Around £50 a head