



RESTAURANTS

Yo ho ho and a big bowl of *bouillabaisse*. **Craig Brown** gets a taste of life on the ocean waves at the nautically themed Lobster Pot

The fashion for tasteful minimalism – black metal chairs, thin spotlights, plain white walls, pencil-thin waiters – may still be going strong, but there is a brave outpost of rebellion in south London, just a few hundred yards from the home of Paddy Ashdown. I am sure that when he is overcome by nostalgia for his formative years in the Special Boat Squadron, Paddy Ashdown makes a beeline for the Lobster Pot. Even a survivor of the *Titanic* could not boast of having been anywhere quite so nautical. The loos alone are sufficient to evoke an almost Conradian experience of life at sea, though happily without the extra burden of a couple of hundred pilgrims struggling for their lives.

One climbs the steep stairs up to the loos past charts of fish to the sound of seagulls cawing through a discreet sound-system. In the corners of the staircase sit little piles of pebbles and shells. Inside the loo, the gnarled heads of old mariners beam merrily down at the inhabitant. Obviously, if they were real, the inhabitant would be able to conduct a citizen's arrest, but instead they are made of plaster, and therefore beyond suspicion. Above the loo hangs a life-ring bearing the legend WHEN IN DANGER OR IN DOUBT/RUN IN CIRCLES, SCREAM AND SHOUT. Corked

netting abounds. Only if Cap'n Birdseye himself were holding one's hand, winking away, could one have a more vivid taste of life on the ocean's waves.

Back downstairs and through a swing door, one enters the tiny restaurant. It is a small gem of campy kitsch. All along one wood-panelled wall there are portholes, and through each porthole can be seen real-life tropical fish, swimming hither and thither. A ship's lantern hangs from the ceiling, and a slightly scary oil painting of a heavily bearded, pipe-smoking old sea dog stares down from another wall. A nautical telephone sits to the left of the kitchen doors, and a ship's helm sits above them. The owners, Hervé and Nathalie Regent, wear blue-and-white striped Breton shirts. Monsieur Regent sports some of the most impressive moustaches in the world of catering, both bushy and manicured (perhaps even marinated too) in a style pitched half-way between Professor Calculus and Thompson and Thumson.

The menu, too, is an outcry against minimalism. Gone is the single sheet with the word-processed inventory. Back comes the red, multi-storey leather-bound volume, as heavy as an overweight bo'sun in an Aran jersey. For those with the muscle to open the menu, a school of delicious fish dishes lies within.

Frogs' legs are often to be found in restaurants in the *Beano* and the *Dandy*, but rarely in real life. Whenever I see frogs' legs, I leap at them, but more for their rarity value than for their taste, which is a bit squirrely for me. Monsieur Regent cooks them in a creamy, garlicky sauce so that those few moments when one really does have a frog in one's throat are not nearly so worrying as they might be.

My wife ordered some mussels that came in what she described as a "fantastic creamy hot sauce", the first time she has used the adjective "fantastic" in more than ten years of reviewing restaurants with me. Mussels seem to be going through a fashionable stage at the moment. One might almost say that they were coming out of their shells, though this may not be such good news for them. I suspect their new popularity has something to do with the growth of DIY. Self-assembly, or self-disassembly, holds strong appeal for the more puritan diner, who feels that he only deserves to eat out if he can be seen to labour for his food.

Less onerous, though still with a hint of DIY, was a delicious, rich fish soup. This came in the proper manner, served with lots of cheese and *rouille* to place on the toast, thus creating lots of soggy little *bûcheaux*. Our final starter, large prawns in garlic and butter, was pleasantly fleshy and without the armour-plating that sometimes renders prawns so scaly in the mouth.

An air of singular contentment seemed to permeate our fellow diners in the Lobster Pot. By and large they were in pairs, quite a few of them male, most with a slightly buttoned-up look about them, as though they were in some way taking in the camp charms of the restaurant through a process of osmosis.

Our main courses scored equally high. One of my companions had skate, poached to perfection – flaky and succulent – with a tomatoey sauce and a decent amount of capers. It all came with a mountain of rice which was, I suppose, a bit dry, but nothing that the tomatoey sauce could not put right.

For my own main course, I chose *bouillabaisse*, surely the test of any proper French fish restaurant. It was a triumph, a vast dish containing an aquarium of varied sea-life. If it had it been only a little bigger I would have been able to transport it to the end of Brighton Pier where I could have opened it as a tourist attraction. So large was my *bouillabaisse* that after what must have been half an hour I realised not only that I was still eating it but that my previous half-hour of eating had made little or no impression upon it. What made it so delicious, and, despite its quantity, so healthy-tasting, was that each individual piece of different fish remained separate: so often it can all be left on too long and deteriorate into a soupy mush.

Other winning main courses included an excellent fillet of mahi-mahi wrapped in smoked salmon and grilled with samphire: it is a sign of the Bretons' professionalism that they can conjure up new dishes with all the dexterity that they bring to the old.

We were so full by the end that only one of us managed a pudding, a refreshing grapefruit sorbet with passion fruit. With our coffee came the final eccentric delight – a generous selection of good old Rose's chocolates in their colourful wrappings. If this is what a life on the ocean waves is like, small wonder that Roger is always so jolly.

The Lobster Pot, 3 Kennington Lane, London SE11 (0171-582 5556). Tues-Sat noon-2.30pm, 7pm-11pm. Dinner for two, including wine, £70

