

THE PASS

DFL • THE SEAHORSE, DARTMOUTH

DFL Chronicles

Words by Fred Chambers

THE SEAHORSE, DARTMOUTH

Escaping the city on the hunt for good food might feel like an honourable pilgrimage for the cosmopolitan foodie - but your sunglasses, white-soled trainers and post-lunch cortado order will definitely give you away...

DAY ONE: THE PRELUDE

It's an early start - especially after last night's lively post-work Paddington to Totnes train journey - complete with the DFL essentials: Torres crisps, Daylesford pork pies and Campari spritzes in proper wine glasses. The first stop on the agenda is a tour of Brixham fish market. White overalls and hairnets on, I feel like Boris Johnson on the campaign trail.

We roll into breakfast and in strolls Mitch Tonks - Founder of Rockfish and The Seahorse. A rare breed with a free spirit and ethereal energy - there aren't many Notting Hillers who'd swap a townhouse to live on a sailboat. 8 am with second brandy in hand and our stomachs lined with a breakfast of scallops, hake and smoked haddock, I quickly realise that this is a man who knows how to live. The

conversation jumps around - we first learn first-hand that Johnny Depp loves a Guinness and is actually a very decent bloke before moving onto sustainable fishing, the uncertain future of the industry in Devon, and whether listing 'day-boat' fish on a London menu is simply a restaurant's trendy attempt to show it gives a shit about produce. In reality, each fishing boat is its own business, with some larger trawlers being far more considerate than poorly run small boats - who knew? I am learning while drinking Armagnac. I like this.

Before tomorrow's main event, we hit up the new cafe at Blackpool Sands, where our magnum rose order attracts three curious waiters to our table. 'This is the first we've sold all summer.' I fear we may have blown our cover.

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DAY TWO: THE MAIN EVENT

En route to the restaurant, we stop for a mandatory pre-meal pint at a nearby local. After 10 minutes I think to myself, 'Why are we always the loudest?'. Oh, no wait - there is another table making noise...and they're also DFL-types. It's like coming into physical contact with your last ten Hinge swipes - self-obsessed, each clutching an Aperol and dressed in fifty shades of beige...are we really all the same?

Time for lunch, but let me quickly say Ben Tonks (ex-Nieves Barragan alum during the Barrafinas golden years) is now leading the kitchen - a challenging gig which requires him to balance honouring the legacy of a restaurant so adored that there is literally a menu on the wall signed 'we fucking love it here' from Angela and Neil (IYKYK), put his own creative identity on the menu while also being the son of founder Mitch...and lordy is he is doing a phenomenal job.

Words can barely do justice to the procession of events. I am not sure what the meaning of life is, but sitting down with your best pals and a menu that opens with 'A good lunch starts at 1 pm and ends in Venice a week later', can't be far off.

The food sings for all the right reasons. I love places that don't feel as though they're trying too hard. Places that take a recognisable dish, elevate it to something utterly divine and leave you thinking 'How the hell did that just happen'. Take, for instance, the gambas crudo with ginger and pink peppercorns. A dish I would have been indifferent to - a bit of raw

seafood, take it or leave it - but then, fuck me. What? How? I don't understand.

CRAB TAGLIATELLE

The procession is well underway. The lightly battered red mullet makes me stop mid-meal and ring Nick Brahman of Quality Wines: 'Have you tried The Seahorse's saffron aioli?!' Unfortunately, he had not. I'll spare you the blow-by-blow details of the razor clams, turbot, beef rib, and crab tag - but they were absolutely perfect. By 7:15 PM, we were gently tapped on the shoulder and informed with a wry smile that we had indeed, fucked their dinner service. Tables 5 and 6 were a turn.

Hospitality at its core is an experience which should leave people feeling better than they did when they arrived. It's about genuine care and making you feel looked after. The Tonks family do this and then some - whether you're a Dartmouth local, international visitor or an obnoxious (but enthusiastic) DFL-er, they go above and beyond to make you feel special. Post-weekend I felt more than well-fed. Enriched and overwhelmingly grateful, I messaged Mitch, 'It is clear you all make a profound impact on lots of lovely ppl...but lordy that was one of the best few days that anyone can have. It is almost waste of time trying to explain it to people who weren't in attendance... properly special'.

There are rumours of a micro restaurant being moored in the harbour just outside The Seahorse next spring. Seriously...who needs Ibiza? ■