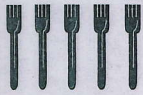


HOUSE PROUD

THE CUSTOMS HOUSE

Baltimore, Co Cork
Tel: 028 20200



THE GENTLEMAN Caller and I recently embarked on a culinary tour of West Cork. We'd read complimentary reports from a variety of sources, and were fully expecting to find ourselves in gourmet wonderland.

Unfortunately, nobody warned us that once the tourist season ends, the shutters come down and it's pub grub or nothing. Our first disappointment was discovering that Ty ar Mor, a well-regarded seafood restaurant in Skibbereen, has closed down. In its place there's a Thai fusion eatery with a similar name that we never saw open. In fact, at 9pm on Thursday evening in Skibbereen, the only food to be had is in the local Chinese or in a fish 'n' chip joint called the Busy Bee.

Americans in search of an authentic famine experience should head for Ballydehob. We wound up there after finding the nearby Good Things café closed. Indeed, if it wasn't for a local wholefood store selling dried fruit, we'd have surely starved. Weak and indiscriminating, we found sustenance at a café in Schull, where what appeared to be shop-bought dressing, administered with a heavy hand, all but ruined my goat cheese salad.

Notwithstanding a presentable meal at Mary Ann's in Castletownshend, West Cork didn't have much to burp or boast about. The Gentleman was threatening a mutiny. But I did my research and came up trumps with The Customs House in Baltimore. There were two set menus: one at €30 offering a choice of Angus steak or Skeaghanore duck. We opted for the €40 menu, which concentrated on local seafood, notably crab, mussels, sole and monkfish.



“Once the tourist season ends, the shutters come down and it's pub grub or nothing”

The Customs House didn't put a foot wrong. Our waitress was a paragon of professionalism; she was friendly without being over-familiar, and informed enough to offer advice and suggestions. There was no palaver about still or sparkling eau minérale; filtered tap water was provided as matter of course, which, the Gentleman and I agreed, was most refreshing.

Other classy touches included an amuse bouche of crostini daubed with mustard and chorizo – thoughtful and delicious. Better still was the pat of butter topped with honey and sprinkles of red Hawaiian rock salt – it took enormous self-restraint to keep my paw out of the bread basket.

For starters the Gentleman chose baby lettuce leaves, rocket and Cashel Blue salad, with

toasted pecan nuts and grilled red onions. It was a triumphant combination of sweet, nutty and peppery flavours. The greens were crisp and bursting with life, while the cheese and sugary pecans added substance.

I had the kind of seafood platter that's usually so expensive I'd never order it. The star of the show was a small copper pot of mussels simply steamed in garlic, butter and white wine; the flesh was vibrant tangerine, and so deliciously velvety that I had to wrestle them from the Gentleman's hungry claws.

Also excellent was the ceviche of monkfish – tender strips in lime juice with sweet strings of onion and pepper. Hell, I even enjoyed the timbale of shredded crabmeat, despite being crustacean ambivalent.

It was blissful to be there, sipping our glasses of Domaine de la Rossignole Sancerre in the candlelight. The Gentleman looked set to fall to his knees, but the arrival of our main course intervened. Sir had the monkfish – pan-fried and served in prawn bisque. In clumsy hands this dish can wind up chewy and tasteless, but once again the production was faultless. With potatoes, organic carrots and green beans, this was posh nosh, which would cost €40 alone in lesser restaurants.

I ordered John Dory – another prohibitively expensive fish – it was meaty but mild and served on potato hash with chorizo and spring onion. I looked for faults in vain. The Customs House is exemplary and much of its success is down to buying fresh, quality produce direct from local suppliers.

Wholly sated, with dessert still to come, I chose a relatively austere trio of homemade sorbets: pear, raspberry and thrillingly acerbic mango. Wonderful as they were, the Gentleman's Tarte Tatin – a syrupy, buttery ode to the apple, with a melting ball of cinnamon ice cream – is still mouth-watering to recall.

The Gentleman quite sensibly ordered a cup of green tea. I had Dilmah black tea, which tasted vaguely of Bergamot. But we weren't done yet: a gentele saucer of handmade

petit fours, including Grand

Marnier and chocolate truffles, brought our €40 feast to a stylish close.

Before recommending that you drive to Baltimore this very evening, I called the Customs House to confirm their opening hours.

Folks, I'm sorry to report they are closing for the winter. Life is so cruel. But for what it's worth, I was delighted

to eat there on your behalf, and in an unprecedented move,

I'm giving the place the full five forks. The Customs House will re-open at Easter. Make a note in your diary. ■

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THE LOW DOW

- **TYPICAL DISH:** Seafood
- **RECOMMENDED:** Monkfish in prawn bisque
- **THE DAMAGE:** €119 for two starters, two main courses, two desserts, two teas, one bottle of wine.
- **ON THE STEREO:** Local singer Tessa Perry
- **AT THE TABLE:** Holidaymakers
- **WHAT TO WEAR:** Nautica
- **DO SAY:** Roll on April
- **DON'T SAY:** Table for two tomorrow night



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