



RICHARD BATH

'THE CHEF'S SIMPLE CULINARY CREDO FITS PERFECTLY WITH THE AVAILABILITY OF SOME OF THE FINEST SEAFOOD IN THE WORLD'

TABLE SERVICE

Loch Leven Seafood Café

Onich, Fort William,
Inverness-shire (01855 821048,
www.lochlevenseafoodcafe.co.uk)

Bill please Starters £4.95-£15.95

Main courses £12.75-£38.50

Puddings £4.95-£5.50 (cheese
£6.50)

Rating



THE only thing better than the trip to Loch Leven Seafood Cafe, a journey through Glencoe and then along the banks of the glassy sea loch, is arriving. It's not the building itself - light and contemporary but designed to be as utilitarian as possible - which takes the breath away, nor is it the stunning views across the loch on a beautiful spring day.

The thing that hits you with the force of a five-ton truck is the quality of the cafe's produce. Most of the seafood is landed by one of its own pair of boats, and as much as possible is kept alive in seawater tanks in the adjacent building before being cooked simply and quickly by head chef Barry Moran. It is a combination that has produced one of Scotland's great hidden culinary gems - if its status as the current seafood restaurant of the year allows for such a thing. This is a seafood restaurant that does by instinct all the things that the finest seafood restaurants now do by design.

The Seafood Cafe story is one that starts with the produce, because its sister company, Lochleven Shellfish, has been exporting to the Far East and Europe for donkey's years, occasionally selling lobsters and the like to locals or pushy members of the public who have wandered in from the nearby road.

Eventually, owner Alison Grieve stuck a couple of picnic tables out front in the occasional bouts of good weather, so that for a couple of months in the summer passing motorists could sit and

look out across Camus Mhor, the Big Bay, to the Pap of Glencoe while being cooked dishes like lobster, pan-fried scallops and chilli prawns to order.

With Kinlochleven just a few miles from Ballachulish and the main west coast tourist route, this flirtation with Joe Public was, unsurprisingly, such a success that by 2006 the decision had been taken to open a restaurant. With its stark, almost clinical, interior of white walls and slate floor tiles the purpose-designed building, which houses about 30 diners, feels more like a cafe than a restaurant, hence the name. But it also fits well with the existing buildings, emphasising the from-sea-to-plate nature of the operation.

The other key component of the new restaurant when it opened back in 2006 was the decision to lure local boy Moran back to the area after six years working alongside Andrew Fairlie. His simple culinary credo is one that fits perfectly with the availability of some of the finest seafood in the world, and is very evident in an ever-changing menu that is surprisingly strong on non-fishy offerings, but which still leads on its unadorned seafood.

We can eat lamb and steaks anywhere in Scotland, though, so after some fantastic home-made crusty bread dipped into a bowl of silky-smooth Arbequina olive oil we stuck rigidly to the fishy format, Bea starting with a bowl of mussels in cider while I chose the razor clams in a salsa-style dressing. Both were hefty servings, although as someone who's



BRIAN ELLIOTT

'JUST LIKE THE ORIGINAL WILD WEST, THIS REGION IS FULL OF SURPRISES'



ALTHOUGH America's Pacific north-west has long been tipped as a rising star of the wine world, its progress has been more evolutionary than revolutionary. Its prices, well outside the bargain basement, may be a factor but - make no mistake - the region's wines can be seriously good.

Despite being neighbours, the two states forming the region, Oregon and Washington, are actually quite different. Oregon is roughly the same distance from the equator as Burgundy and New Zealand's Central Otago. Not surprisingly then, pinot noir quickly became the major grape variety - although some pinot gris is also produced.

Oregon pinot noir has always been fruit forward but became richer and bigger in the mid-1990s. Top grower Alex Sokol Blosser suggests several possible reasons such as lower yields, better management and earlier ripening - different rootstock is now used

to combat the phylloxera aphid that caused havoc there 15 years ago.

Even within the state, however, styles can vary with, for instance, 2008 Fireseed Pinot Noir (£16, Vino Wines, Edinburgh) offering a light, fresh expression of the grape that delivers raspberry and red cherry fruit with touches of mint but pronounced, juicy, concluding acidity. More Burgundian is the earthier 2008 Sokol Blosser Pinot Noir (£24.99, www.lescaves.co.uk) with its darker colour, fuller body and touches of cloves and mocha to supplement the perfumed black cherry flavours.

Possibly to its commercial detriment, Washington State has no such signature grape. Its initial focus was riesling, then the spotlight turned to merlot but, more recently, cabernet sauvignon and syrah have become the emerging heroes. Conditions in the state differ too. Mother Nature has been kind to the Washington wine industry by providing almost

perfect growing conditions that repel mildew-based diseases and have kept phylloxera at bay - allowing original rootstock to be used so time-consuming grafting can be avoided. Mankind also helped with a massive pre-war irrigation project.

Among Washington's white wines, I was impressed by 2008 Columbia Crest Grand Estates Chardonnay (£12, Henderson Wines). It is a rich, vanilla-charged chardonnay with slowly developing butter touches that underpin the lemon and mango fruit and work well with its mild nutmeg finish.

It is made by the state's biggest operation, Chateau Ste Michelle, that has a hand in several big initiatives. One was a collaboration with Germany's Ernest Loosen that created the excellent 2008 Eroica Riesling (£18.99, www.slurp.co.uk,) with its lime fruit supported by flavours ranging from passion fruit and mandarin to pear.

The reds contain several interesting contrasts. 2008 Washington Hills Merlot (£6.99, Co-op) is a light, racy wine with plenty of lively acidity without undue gravitas. It has minty, plum stone flavours that mingle with ripe blueberry fruit. For something a little older and more substantial, try 2006 Chateau Ste Michelle Columbia Valley Merlot (£13.99, Edinburgh Wine Importers) with its smooth, black cherry and cinnamon flavours along with soft touches of cedar wood, spice and sage.

Although some experimental wines are still short of the finished article, research and development with varieties (and now clones of them) has long been part of the Washington story. For example, influential grower Butch Milbrandt is investigating the viability of malbec and neatly exploited a serious frost in December to add a 2010 Eiswein to his range.

Another local (and far from coy)



been preparing mussels since she was big enough to walk to the end of the pier outside her childhood home, Bea was slightly surprised (I think that's the euphemism) to find the shellfish retained their beards. Other than that, they were well-scrubbed, with their varying sizes pointing to locally sourced wild mussels rather than the rope-grown variety, while the cider lent a sweet edge to proceedings.

The man who turned me on to razor clams was Roy Brett, the inestimable owner of Ondine, a walking encyclopaedia when it comes to crustaceans. As I worked my way through half a dozen prime examples, I suspected he would have approved of the way Moran had served them with a pepper-laden and caper-heavy garnish – I certainly did.

I was equally enamoured of the two huge brown crabs that arrived for my main course. They were the biggest specimens I'd ever seen, but made for fantastic eating. My earliest childhood memories are of picking apart crab claws on the beach as a toddler, so this was a messy meander down memory mile for me.

If I was grinningly content with my pair of crabs, Bea wasn't quite as enamoured with her seafood platter. Perhaps it's because she's oyster-obsessed and was disappointed to find just one solitary oyster, or maybe it was because she felt the large number of clams were there to bulk out the dish, but she considered £38.50 a little steep for a platter that was completed by a trio of langoustines, a razor clam and a lobster tail. There was no denying the quality though.

There was also no argument about the puddings. My vanilla yoghurt panna cotta with stewed rhubarb just about passed muster, but Bea's super-creamy vanilla ice-cream ensured the meal ended on a high note.

Not that it was ever going to be any different: good service, a more than competent chef and an innate understanding that the best thing to do with fresh seafood is to serve it as quickly and as simply as possible, all ensure the Loch Leven Seafood Cafe remains a class act. ■

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product that caught my eye was The Magnificent Wine Company 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon (£9.49, Co-op). Both the extrovert label and the wine inside it will, however, raise eyebrows among claret traditionalists. The wine is lighter, with more acidity and less tannin than “orthodox” versions but some very pronounced cherry and bramble fruit with a green pepper finish.

Just like the original Wild West, this region is full of surprises, energy and excitement. The two states are second and third in the US wine producing league, but a long way behind California. With their committed growers and the distinctive wines they produce, that gap really ought to narrow quickly. ■

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