



Catch of the day

Mitch Tonks is an award winning chef, restaurateur, food writer, keen sailor and member of the Cruising Association. **Trevor Taylor** met him at his Rockfish seafood restaurant in Brixham where he revealed his long-term sailing ambitions, gave some top tips for cooking on board and explained how a lobster got him into trouble

It was nine o'clock in the morning and I have to admit it's a time when I'm not at my best. "Hello Trevor," said Mitch, full of energy, as he arrived in the restaurant's bar. I suppose if you are used to getting up for the 4am fish market then 9 o'clock is the middle of your day.

If you sail the south-west coast of England you cannot fail to know of Rockfish seafood restaurants. Their bright sea-green fronts are to be found along the coast from Exeter to Plymouth. It is no coincidence that all these restaurants are in coastal locations, because not only does Mitch insist on being close to the fish markets, but he's also a keen sailor and CA member. "I keep my boat in Brixham and often sail to work, round to the restaurants in Dartmouth and then on to Plymouth." If only all of us could find such a persuasive argument for mixing business and pleasure.

I had arranged to meet Mitch to record a podcast, and his passion for fish and his attention to detail were soon apparent. Music was playing in the restaurant. "Is that on the Rockfish playlist?" he asked one of the staff. Somewhat anxious that customers were being serenaded by an unauthorised tune, the kitchen assistant

quickly scanned the Sonos app on the restaurant iPad and confirmed the music was indeed approved. "Sorry, I am obsessed by these details," said Mitch. It was all a bit academic really because I wanted the music turned off anyway so we could record, but the point was made – Mitch Tonks has a vision of his restaurant experience and that extends from the dishes to the background music. It all has to be perfect and in impeccable taste.

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If he's that fussy at work, what's he like as a skipper, I wondered? "I have a Hallberg-Rassy 36 which I found in Scotland after a long search, and it had hardly been used. The chap who I bought it from had had it since new and had only sailed it a few times and then kept it in an air-conditioned barn," he explained. Yup, I might have guessed, he's fussy about his boat too.

Mitch keeps his boat, *Nellie III*, in the marina at Brixham, his home town,

which is also the location of one of the first Rockfish restaurants. Running a successful string of seafood restaurants and being fastidious about everything from the landed fish to the background music means he's a busy chap. His mobile phone never stops pinging as a school of text messages get hooked. He is decent enough though to only deal with the urgent ones – the ones from his wife.

Mitch Tonks is at the top of his game, one of the UK's leading seafood chefs. His upmarket Seahorse restaurant in Dartmouth has again been voted Devon's best restaurant. Giles Coren in the *Sunday Times* says it served "the best meal I have had all year" while Tom Parker-Bowles wrote "...this corking quayside restaurant might be the best in Britain." One of the restaurant's most popular dishes is locally caught lobster. It's ironic then that a lobster turned the tables, very nearly wrecking Mitch's boat and threatening his life and that of his crew.

It all happened in the most unexpected circumstances, as is so often the case. The sea was calm, the visibility good. He'd just left Cherbourg and all was going well. *Nellie III* was doing a steady seven knots when she stopped dead. There was alarm



Discount for CA members at Rockfish & Seahorse

Mitch Tonks is offering all fellow CA members a 10% discount off food and wine at his Rockfish and Seahorse restaurants. To obtain the discount simply produce your valid CA membership card when you settle the bill.

Rockfish restaurants are located in:

- Plymouth
- Dartmouth
- Brixham
- Torquay
- Exmouth
- Exeter

The Seahorse* restaurant is in Dartmouth.

New Rockfish restaurants are opening in Poole (July) and Weymouth (October)

*The discount does not apply to the special £20 lunchtime "locals" menu at the Seahorse.

on board. *Nellie III* had hit a submerged string of lobster pots. There was a fast tide running and 15 to 18 knots of wind. Mitch and the crew managed to cut the pots free, but the lines had snagged the rudder with a total loss of steerage. Suddenly a pleasant cross-channel sail tuned into a near disaster. Unable to manoeuvre in a fast-moving tide, and with busy shipping lanes not far away, he swiftly recognised the imminent danger. Attempts to cut free the tangled lines proved unsuccessful. The rudder was stuck and the lobster pot lines were like steel rigging, binding the rudder and making it impossible to helm. They were in very real danger and needed help fast. "I sent a Pan Pan call because I realised without help, and fast, we were going to be in serious trouble," said Mitch in a matter-of-fact way. A French harbour boat from Cherbourg was launched and came to their rescue. They were towed in, and once there were tied up, a diver removed the tangled tackle. "We were lucky, because had there been a big swell we would probably have lost the boat."

That was one lobster pot he wished he hadn't raised, but it led me to wonder about his boat's galley. Is it state of the art? Are there two double ovens, a six burner induction hob and an electric grill in the galley? "No, it's a normal boat gas cooker. Four burners and an oven, but I do just about everything in two pots, one for rice and the other for the fish, usually a curry. Actually I don't catch much, mackerel perhaps, then it's popped under the grill. Delicious and so fresh." (Listen to the podcast – see panel, next page – to hear Mitch give some top tips for cooking on board.)

Mitch is an experienced sailor, and a

Yachtmaster, but thought he'd wrecked his chances of a Yachtmaster ticket while taking the exam. "I'd planned everything perfectly and everything went the complete opposite. I thought 'Not now, not now'. I didn't panic, I took control of the boat and the crew and got myself out of the marina and the instructor said 'OK, that's fine, I know you can handle the boat.'" He got his Yachtmaster qualification despite the hiccup, or maybe because of it.

Mitch plans to take *Nellie III* across the Channel, down the Atlantic coasts of France, Spain and Portugal and into the Mediterranean. "I don't want to rush down, I want to stop and see as many places as possible. There are some great seafood restaurants on the Galicia coast and in the Spanish Rias and I want to try them all. It's difficult to take long breaks and run the business, but I can do a couple of weeks at a time."

His sailing ambitions don't end in the Med. In a few years' time he wants to do the ARC (Atlantic Rally for Cruisers) and in preparation is planning some long-distance blue water cruises. "I've no idea what ocean sailing is like, I haven't done any really big offshore passages, and with the right crew and right boat it's got to be a lot of fun."

How about bad weather, had he been out in a gale for instance? "No, I've never really experienced bad weather: sixes and sevens, tops of sevens, but nothing too horrible, and I'm quite looking forward to it actually." He likes a challenge.

Before Rockfish, Mitch had seafood restaurants in Bath and London and came to Devon to buy fish for them at the Brixham market. He fell in love



Listen to the podcast

To hear the full interview with Mitch Tonks listen to the exclusive podcast at www.theca.org.uk/sites/all/misc/podcasts/



with Brixham because it had everything; property so close to the sea the seagulls counted as neighbours, a thriving fishing port and, above all, the potential to create a seafood restaurant. He saw a house and bought it. He bought an old pizza restaurant in Dartmouth – that became The Seahorse. He was hooked. He adores Brixham: it's an honest, unpretentious working town where fishing is the dominant industry and the people are friendly and welcoming. "And property prices are rising nicely", he says. What has happened to Dartmouth and Salcombe is now happening to Brixham. It is becoming desirable and trendy but is still affordable. Estate agents predict it's the next "big thing" on the south Devon coast.

Almost a million pounds worth of fish is landed at Brixham every week and although around 40 species end up in Brixham's nets the catch is dominated by high-value varieties: lobster, scallops, sea bass, brill and turbot. Ninety per cent of the catch is exported and the highly prized Brixham lobsters and scallops end up on the top tables of Paris. But you don't need to go to Paris for fine seafood dining, you can enjoy the same premium quality and expert cooking in Devon.

The Seahorse restaurant in Dartmouth is Mitch's showcase establishment. It has won many awards including Best UK Restaurant and has been in the top 100 for ten years. It is fine dining with extras. "We cook a lot of dishes over an open fire, it has an Italian, Mediterranean feel – lots of pasta. We also have a lot of staff and just 40 covers. It's a place for a celebration, a treat. We have some really great wines too." It's not cheap, but if you fancy a treat and would prefer to avoid the dent in the wallet then take advantage of this 'secret' tip from Mitch: "We have a twenty quid lunchtime menu which is really for the locals and those who know about it." Mum's the word.

Sustainability is a buzzword these days and sometimes it's used as a marketing ploy, but not by Mitch. He gets quite serious when you mention sustainability – he is a passionate believer in ethical fishing. "It's a way of life. Why would you use anything that's not sustainable?" he says. "These days the fishermen are always telling us there's more out there than is being caught, which is good."

Mitch gets serious when you mention sustainability – he's a passionate believer in ethical fishing

Although serious about fish and his restaurants he has a mischievous side which is not suppressed for long. He has a great sense of humour which is evident when you visit any of the Rockfish loos. The familiar tones of Brian Perkins echo around the porcelain as the unmistakable poetry of the BBC Radio 4 Shipping Forecast fills the air. But hold on, it sounds like the Shipping Forecast and it is certainly Brian Perkins reading it, but something's not quite right. Listen to the podcast to discover what.

As we talk in the first floor bar of the restaurant which overlooks Brixham Harbour a trawler docks alongside. It is just yards away and the cranes immediately start to unload the catch straight into the Brixham Fish Market below. It is impossible to imagine a seafood restaurant closer to the landed fish – the day's catch is virtually loaded off the trawlers and into the kitchen. It would not surprise me if the fish were still flapping on the kitchen slab.

Mitch does not like to talk about it much but he supports various local charities. There's an optional one-pound donation added to every bill which goes

to support a number of good causes, including "Pride in Brixham" which has received £10,000 to help maintain gardens in the town and keep the place looking smart. He is also the sponsor of the very popular Brixham Fish Market Tours – a 6am glimpse behind the scenes of England's biggest fish market. The tours are hosted by the Brixham Trawler Agents and a special tour has been arranged for CA members on May 9, which is followed by a seafood breakfast in the Brixham Rockfish Restaurant. Mitch promises to lay on something special. No point in trying to book for that I'm afraid, it's been sold out for months.

Just as we are concluding our recording of the podcast Mitch springs a surprise – and what a treat for CA members. "I'd love to see fellow members enjoying our restaurants so I'd like to offer fellow members 10% off the bill, that's food and wine for you and your guests." To obtain your 10% discount at any Rockfish restaurant or The Seahorse simply produce your valid CA membership card when you settle the bill.

"I look forward to welcoming fellow CA members at the Rockfish and Seahorse restaurants," says Mitch. With a 10% discount and great food I think he can be pretty sure members will be taking him up on that offer.

Trevor Taylor spent a lifetime in broadcasting and film production. Upon retirement to south Devon he decided it was about time he got a proper job, and so has taken on the role of Secretary of the South West Section. After many years sailing cats he now sails a 40 foot monohull, *Breeze*, which he and his wife Jo keep in the Ionian.

