

From Parsons Green to Walberswick

21 Jul 2007 by Nick Lander/FT

Water, and lots of it, was the recurring theme in our excellent meal at The Anchor in Walberswick on the Suffolk coast, and then in my conversations with Mark Dorber, who, together with his chef and wife Sophie, has for the past two years been skilfully reinventing this pub with rooms that he manages on a long lease from Adnams the brewers.

It was raining hard as we walked into the warm, comfortable dining room where the skirting boards are hidden by a vast array of cookery books. What followed - generous portions of a lamb curry, scallops with artichoke puree, a fish stew and a vast steak - warmed us through sufficiently so that when there was a brief break in the clouds we decided to venture out onto the terrace at the back for dessert. Although anyone who associates holidays with lounging about in warm weather would have been perplexed as the four of us huddled together over excellent hot steamed puddings, one date and walnut the other ginger and rhubarb, and glasses of dessert wine only a week before Midsummer's Day.

Subsequent emails from Dorber revealed further consequences of the recent heavy rain: first he apologised for the delay in his reply but a power surge along his broadband route due to flooding nearby had knocked out not just all contact with the outside world but also the hand held servers which the waiters use to send orders to his kitchen. And second, he added that the answer to a question I had posed would be forthcoming 'lightning permitting'.

When I later caught up with Dorber over lunch at Canteen in Spitalfields, East London, I thought that the reason he looked so cheerful might be relief at being away from what I know now to be a very wet but distinctly beautiful and quiet corner of rural England. But as we talked I realised that his constant good humour has far more to do with his love of his job, his family's new life outside London and his comment that he is now far happier playing second fiddle to his wife, whom he touchingly described 'as the most caring person I have ever met in the hospitality business'.

This is a business Dorber has been in since the summer of 1981, when, having turned his back on a PhD on 'just wars' (something, he admitted, that could have come in quite useful recently), he took over the tenancy of The White Horse in Parsons's Green, West London. Over the next 25 years Dorber built this pub into a beacon for wine and beer enthusiasts (a love of which he thoughtfully attributes to his housemaster at Salford Grammar School), a process that was enhanced in 1994 when Sophie Mellor applied for the job of Head Chef. This led not only to a significant improvement in the food but also to their marriage.

But the pull of Suffolk was too strong, not just via his passion for Adnams beers but also because Sophie used to run a private catering business there, so that when the opportunity arose to take on The Anchor on an 18 year lease he had no hesitation in offering the £200,000 asking price to move to the country. And he immediately recognised the gulf between town and country.

"I have never forgotten that when I first took over at The White Horse the pub's front windows were broken on six different occasions by people who obviously did not want us there. When we moved here we were greeted by a great group of surveyors, estate agents and curious locals who really helped us settle in and establish the vital contacts any new business needs. They made us feel very welcome," Dorber explained.

The most obvious and practical introduction was to Erica Clegg, a designer based in nearby Aldeburgh (whose renowned musical festival recommences in August), who cleverly created a new identity for the pub that exudes the freshness of the food and uses colours redolent of the sea and the open skies. Fitting into such a community also brings with it an extra set of responsibilities for a local publican and his team, which involves the kitchen providing hot meals for those in the village too ill to cook for themselves. And, more obviously, putting on the menu a special Pensioners' Lunch at £6.95 for two courses.

Since their takeover, the Dorbers' business plan has involved, most obviously, putting fresh food firmly back on the menu, doubling the allotment at the back, which now yields rocket, salad leaves, onions, runner beans, broad beans and herbs, and opening up the supply chain to many of the dedicated growers and producers in East Anglia. And while Dorber is looking forward to working with a local farmer to promote salt-marsh lamb, there was no hiding his despondency at the demise of the local fishing industry where the catches are so much lower due to over-fishing in the North Sea; he and other local restaurateurs are often unable to compete with the higher prices London restaurateurs will pay for such local delicacies as Cromer crab. A possible solution, Dorber explained, may be to buy a share in a fishing boat, finances permitting.

So far they have invested £250,000 of their savings into The Anchor with another £200,000 to follow as turnover has doubled from £325,000 to £670,000 and the infrastructure has been put in place to run a pub with five bedrooms, six chalets, a 50 seater dining room, three small bars and outside seating for up to 180 when holidaymakers leave the nearby beach hungry and thirsty for a barbecue.

Recruitment for the kitchen remains the biggest challenge and Dorber is only too aware that his major role now is to keep his wife healthy and happy as so much of their business now rests on her talented shoulders. "Sophie has lifted the quality of the food that is served here significantly but for the moment it has to stay simple and easily reproducible until we can confidently build a team to take it on to the next stage. And until we manage that I have to be patient with what fascinates me, matching wines and beers with the food we serve, and concentrate instead on managing the cash flow and paying the bills on time."

But a strong cash flow is allowing Dorber to look around for a second pub somewhere close by but it has to be one that meets two essential criteria. Firstly, it has to have the space to allow him to fulfil his dream of building a micro-brewery and secondly, as the waters recede for the time being at least, it will have to be on higher ground.

The Anchor, Main Street, Walberswick Suffolk IP18 6UA, 01502-722112,
www.anchoratwalberswick.com