

## Glasgow's freshest fish

3 Aug 2009 by Nick Lander/ BA Business Life

Crabshakk, which opened six months ago, five minutes from Glasgow city centre, has already garnered numerous awards - with some justification on the basis of the dinner we enjoyed there. But its significance lies beyond the charms of the many plates of Scottish fish, shellfish and of course crab, which it now serves every day.

Its initial importance lies in the combination of an unlikely location, an unusual building and its architect, who became a restaurateur in his early 50s and who has cleverly brought Crabshakk to life. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that this is Glasgow, the final factor in this development was a pint of beer and a haggis roll enjoyed at The Nevis, one of the city's oldest pubs just across the road.

The location is Finnieston, once home to Glasgow's bustling docks and shipyards, which, although they are now relatively quiet, bequeathed to the city a series of impressive late-19th-century buildings. One of these now houses a chic launderette and a newsagent that has, like so many across the country, closed its doors.

Last year, as the sun shone on to these shop fronts, architect John Macleod was standing outside The Nevis, pint and roll in hand. Ever since he moved to Glasgow 30 years ago as a student from the Isle of Lewis, where his family have been boat-builders for six generations, Macleod had been saddened by the fact that his now adopted city did not boast a simple shellfish restaurant that could serve what lies so abundantly in the seas nearby.

His inspiration lay 6,000 miles away in San Francisco, where the Swann Oyster Depot has been serving oysters and shellfish for decades. A narrow strip of a restaurant with a single counter, this place has become so popular with residents and visitors that the queue outside is often as long as the number of customers happily eating inside.

Macleod was therefore not fazed by the building's relatively small size, which at 1,500 sq ft is usually considered too small for a restaurant. 'Fortunately', he explained, 'the ground floor was 4.2 metres from floor to ceiling, which meant that we could just squeeze in a mezzanine, which seats 22.' The ground floor seats another 32, albeit at some of the narrowest tables I have ever seen, including 15 around the bar that faces on to an open kitchen.

Eating at the bar was another pleasure Macleod wanted to introduce into Glasgow but here he has chosen to show off his architectural flair. Three art deco lamps dominate the curved bar, lending a contrast to the modernity of the glass tiles on the walls, and to give the feel of an old-fashioned fishmonger's. On the walls there are black and white photographs from his family album of young boys fishing off the rocks, an old model sailing boat lent by a close friend, and a sign that reads Fish and Chips Ahoy.

The majority of Crabshakk's immediate success, which has surprised even Macleod, is owed to the impeccable sourcing of the impressive shellfish around the Scottish coasts, an enthusiastic, young team and some keen pricing.

Quite correctly, the menu itself is relatively simple. Oysters on ice; langoustines, cold or grilled; lobster served as a half or a whole; scallops with anchovies; and a large platter of fruits de mer for two. And plenty of crab, naturally: in a rich bisque; as a plate of crab claws; and also transformed into some of the best crab cakes I have ever tasted with just the right amount of chilli. Keeping all these under what Macleod considers to be the crucial price points of £6, £10 and £13 has also contributed to the overall sense of pleasure for anyone eating here.

So too has been a clever strap line 'cracking good food' and the use of simple, old-fashioned stamps on the menu depicting fish, sailing boats and mussel pots. No wonder, said Macleod, obviously relishing his new career, 'every night feels like Hogmanay'.

Crabshakk, Glasgow, [www.crabshakk.com](http://www.crabshakk.com)