

The View review

Annie Bullen *drifts happily into the Med*



Lemon Sole in Old Portsmouth

**Lemon Sole • 123 High Street • Old Portsmouth • PO1 2HW
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There we were, sipping a crisp, cold white wine, nibbling juicy olives and dipping warm pitta bread into bowls of guacamole and a spicy salsa. The sun was warm on our faces and, with a little imagination, we could have been sitting on a Mediterranean terrace, waiting for our lunch.

The late sun streaming through the windows, the deep cream, blue and yellow seaside colours of the restaurant and the smell of fresh fish cooking in the kitchen made the Lemon Sole a pleasant place to be.

It's an attractive building, the exterior of the old bow-window framed with clambering ivy, a line of box plants and other greenery, with a burst of sunny colours inside. Owner Sunil Sood bought the Lemon Sole just three years ago after long experience at the Taj Hotels in Mumbai, India and at Harrods and Fortnum & Mason, London. He runs it in tandem with the below-stairs Crofts Wine Cellar, which shares the menu but has a different, more pubby atmosphere.

Sunil was keen to explain what makes his restaurant different from others. You get to choose your fish – and the way it is cooked, he told us. A display of fresh fish is spread out seductively on ice-topped seaweed. When we visited, there was Arctic char, Dover sole, lemon sole, bream, plaice, tuna, swordfish, salmon, brill, monkfish, some scallops, oysters and king prawns. The menu, with

cooking suggestions for the main courses, and the starters, is on a blackboard above the fish counter.

This is where your choice comes in. You decide on a fish and then discuss the sauce or cooking method. So it's fine to order it simply cooked with butter or with white wine and butter or olive oil, garlic and herb butter. Accompanying sauces include beurre blanc, mushroom and fennel, hollandaise, lemon and thyme or red pepper, basil and chilli.

And the wine 'list' is right there, next to the fish display: a large rack of bottles from which you select on the spot. If it's white you want (and most do with the fish) they've got the same bottle chilling in the fridge.

We chose and retired to our window table with a bottle of Crowded House – a lovely dry New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc. Soon the plate of nibbles arrived and it was tough not to be greedy, knowing there was more to come. That more was two scallop shells, one filled with crunchy whitebait, the other with calamari for Roy. They came with a creamy sauce. A great dish of mussels, gently steaming, was placed before me. Some nice chewy bread, and a good broth made for a satisfying starter.

We could have had seafood chowder, lobster, crab and prawns with a marie-rose dressing, scallops, goat-cheese tart, oysters,

asparagus or deep-fried brie. Our waiter was charming, a student from Hungary, here for three months to learn English (which was already pretty good) before going home to become a biologist.

Roy has been a Portsmouth football supporter all his life. And so, it turned out, were all the staff, including Ben, the head chef. Our visit was just a day or so after former Portsmouth manager Harry Redknapp had forsaken the club for the greener grass of Spurs, so I was just a little apprehensive that the kitchen might have been affected. Not a bit of it – true professionals they were, producing bacon-wrapped monkfish on a bed of caramelised roasted vegetables for Roy and a butter-grilled brill for me, both with new potatoes. The brill was – well, brill – as was the spinach, just wilted in a hot garlic and sweet chilli dressing.

In addition to the fish, there are vegetarian meals and meaty dishes, including steaks, lamb shank, chicken fajitas and chicken madeira.

The very good coffee had just the right kick to push us in the direction of the nearby harbour where we walked the old walls and watched the little sailing boats and the ferries glide across a sparkling sea.

Our meal, without drinks, came to £58.90 ▼



Enjoying lunch in a sunny corner of the restaurant



Sunil with head chef Ben and their team



Monkfish on a bed of roasted vegetables