

Travel

1960s Courrèges dress: vintage couture. It control and started investing in its restora-

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Lobster please, and make it snappy

A Cornish hotel is offering guests the chance to help catch and prepare their own supper. By Ian Belcher

Seafood is rarely fresher or more strikingly beautiful. I'm aboard a small boat, jiggling on a placid Cornish sea, clutching an angry lobster of Prussian blue tinged with ochre, its claws spread wide: a crucified crustacean anticipating its own last supper.

Just hours later, boiling water has alchemised its shell into a crimson coffin. I'm back on terra firma watching an acclaimed chef reverentially fill the empty torso with chunks of plump white lobster, its cooked flesh awaiting a shroud of brandy and cream sauce.

The last rites of the delicious seafood are being administered on a new catch-it, cook-it package in south Cornwall. Launched this month by Portloe's Lugger Hotel, it lets guests head out on the ocean to bag the core ingredients for supper, which they're later taught to prepare in the hotel's much-lauded kitchen.

Portloe is a compact fishing village on the Roseland peninsula, its photogenic huddle of cottages chasing the wooded valley down to a tiny, steep-sided harbour dotted with lobster pots and palm trees. You certainly won't find a more atmospheric classroom than the Lugger. Its 17th-century buildings cluster around the water in a higgledy-piggledy labyrinth of white

and cream rooms sprinkled with sun-catching terraces. Once it served smugglers – landlord Black Dunstan was hanged for his crimes in the 1890s – now it looks after tourists seeking a stylish bolthole, spa treatments and gourmet seafood.

While Portloe may look the part, its fishermen aren't licensed to carry guests. Instead, I drive eight miles to St Mawes, from where James Brown, a cheerful, weather-beaten skipper runs fishing trips on local waters.

After a 10-minute wind-in-your-hair boat ride, we stop near the chunky tower of St Anthony's lighthouse where Brown, a commercial fisherman for 25 years, pulls in his first pot. About 30ft below, the rope trap, baited with "stinky old fish", has been sitting among kelp trailing from nearby rocks.

It yields a couple of small velvet swimming crabs with sensuously fuzzy shells. They're too small to eat although the French harvest them for soup. "I reckon that Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has a bit of French in him," says Brown. "He'll eat anything."

Pot two is more prolific: a 2lb dogfish, its shark DNA reflected in its torpedo physique, and a brown crab. Eating size. Just. Wearing thick rubber gloves, Brown pulls it out by its

back legs and holds the shell at the sides. "Be careful," he advises. "A large crab or lobster could easily crush your finger. We generally pull the claws off before that happens – dismember them before they dismember you."

Motoring out to a point opposite the entrance to Falmouth harbour, we drop lines of feathered hooks over the side of the boat in pursuit of mackerel, pollock and pouting. But an hour passes and nothing bites apart from a comically small sand lance – the bait for tonight's lobster traps.

As rain draws a grey veil over the headland and a flotilla of yachts dots

the monochrome ocean, we check two more pots. The first contains a featherweight lobster with a heavyweight attitude – too small – the second, a far meatier specimen. At 91mm, he meets the legal standards and is right for the stove. He's beautiful but furious. Brown issues a further warning about the double-jointed claws that snap well behind the head.

The relief of making a catch is palpable. But even if you do come up empty-handed, you needn't write off the cookery demonstration. Curgurrell Farm, en route back to the Lugger, sells live and cooked beauties. It does, of course, make you more of a

gatherer than a hunter-gatherer.

I'm back at the hotel by midday, handing my still punchy catch to Austrian chef Franz Hornegger, the amiable antithesis of motor-mouthed TV cooking stars. He sticks them in the fridge "to calm down" while I enjoy a cliff-top hike, returning about 5pm. His small corner kitchen, where a three-strong team works, has a ludicrously cute harbour setting – a recent spring tide swirled right around its walls.

The sedated crustaceans wriggle disturbingly in boiling water but are dead within seconds. The lobster gets 15 minutes, the crab 20. They boil. I sup a gin and tonic. "Seafood mustn't be overcooked," says Hornegger, a veteran of several Newquay hotels and Mosimann's in London. "Treat it lightly. Show respect."

The chef works rapidly, issuing clear, precise advice on preparing lobster thermidor. I learn to de-claw the body, slice it in half, clean it – the empty shell is for serving – and extract meat from the claws "like shelling a pea". The detritus of broken shell is destined for a bouillabaisse; the flesh for immersion in a thermidor sauce of melted butter, cream, mustard and brandy poured with Keith Floyd panache.

The crab requires less adornment. After cracking open the underside of the shell, its muscle, guts and juice – a trilogy resembling a *Dr Who* monster – are removed. The cleaned shell is refilled with dark meat overlaid with a seam of white flesh from the claws. It's served on a mixed leaf salad with half a lemon. Simple.

"It may not look much," says Hornegger. "But this is dense filling meat. We could turn it into a tian with crème fraîche but when it's this fresh, it speaks for itself."

Not quite true. Twenty minutes later, in a dining room as unfussy as the salad – white linen, candles and a few local seascapes beneath a low-beamed ceiling – the unadulterated crabmeat proves even better in a dialogue with a 2008 Muscadet.

The windows are thrown open, providing a noseful of brine to complement my mouthful of ocean. Eight miles away the small lance is sitting in Brown's pots, luring lobsters for a future Lugger feast: the next link in the endless, brutal but gloriously tasty food chain.

The Lugger offers two nights, including breakfasts and one dinner, with fishing trip and lobster-cooking class from £360 for two; www.luggerhotel.com



Catch Ian Belcher (left) with fisherman James Brown; the Lugger Hotel