

# Restaurants Tracey MacLeod

## Designer diner



**RESTAURANT  
CRITIC OF  
THE YEAR**

We all know what a seaside restaurant should look like. Scrubbed wooden tables, perhaps draped with a tasteful bit of Cath Kidston lighthouse-sprigged oilcloth; old photos of grizzled fishermen; some fishing nets, driftwood or other maritime detritus; a blackboard advertising the Catch of the Day

(inevitably just sold out). So what the hell was the owner of the Thorpeness Brasserie on when he dreamed up his decorative scheme?

Vintage copies of *Picture Post* provide the wallpaper for the main dining room, so that you walk in to the bosomy, black-and-white embrace of a thousand forgotten movie stars. The children's area is papered with old copies of *The Dandy*, while two smaller rooms at the back are lined with *Private Eye* covers from the 1980s, which not only looks unexpectedly brilliant but means that diners need never run short of conversation about Frances Pym or Zola Budd.

Those areas that aren't papered with old magazines turn out, on closer inspection, to be lined with brown wrapping paper, and the candy-striped armchairs by the door could be upholstered in Missoni fabric, or, more likely, something customised from an old windbreak. It's riotous, playful and totally unexpected, in this oh-so-tasteful corner of Suffolk, where the appreciation of modern design has been most famously expressed by the repeated vandalism of Maggie Hambling's scallop sculpture on Thorpeness beach.

The man behind this eruption of quirky serendipity is the Brasserie's owner (and designer) Tom Brent, who was responsible in the early Eighties for the look of the relaunched L'Escargot in Soho (and a host of imitators). Working here on a considerably tighter budget (the wall coverings were sourced from eBay for a total cost of £100) he has converted a down-at-heel café into a funky and flexible all-day haven for the very mixed crowd of visitors that flock to this peculiar place. An Arts and Crafts model village built in the Twenties by a local landowner, Thorpeness is Suffolk's Portmeirion, the expression of one man's idiosyncratic vision, complete with huge, artificial, Peter Pan-inspired boating lake.

Thorpeness Brasserie fits right in to this visionary tradition. With its adjacent junk shop (sorry, Emporium), live music evenings and breakfast-through-supper opening hours, it feels like a labour of love that's one step away from being a folly.

I first dropped into the Brasserie after an afternoon's rowing on the Meare, and the quality of the home-made carrot cake was enough to persuade me to return for lunch the next day. The lunch menu offers straightforward brasserie dishes, simply and competently prepared. Expectations were raised by a smooth and well-seasoned fish soup,



**THORPENESS  
BRASSERIE AND  
EMPORIUM**  
Aldeburgh Road,  
Thorpeness, Suffolk  
(01728 453105)

Food ★★★★★  
Ambience ★★★★★  
Service ★★★★★

Around £15 a head  
for lunch; £30 a head  
for dinner

**TIPPING POLICY**  
"No service charge.  
Customers tip as and  
when they want; 100  
per cent of the tips  
go to the restaurant  
staff"

finished with a slug of Ricard, and served with croutons and a glossy yellow aioli. Also good was a spinach, potato and garlic soup which had just the kind of home-made quality you start to crave at the end of a holiday. But mains were patchy: the Caesar salad with smoked chicken was over-reliant on croutons, and the ham and fried eggs owed more to the greasy-spoon than the brasserie.

Also disappointing was the fact – though Thorpeness lies just down the coast from the fishing boats of Aldeburgh – that the only fresh fish on the lunch menu was poached Loch Duart salmon. At least it was decently prepared, and served with good, freshly-made mayonnaise.

The dinner menu tries harder, offering more ambitious dishes. We returned to try it a few days later (well, there isn't much to do around these parts) and were impressed by the daily specials, a grilled Aldeburgh sole (hurrah!), smothered in tiny brown shrimps, and pan-fried calves liver in grain mustard sauce with buttery mash, the sort of dish you imagine the

executive chef Sue Miles may have perfected during her early-Eighties stint at L'Escargot.

Both she and Tom Brent were hard at work on all three occasions I visited the Brasserie. Tom has given up his career as a designer in London for this new venture – this is their first summer and they're obviously throwing everything they have at the place to make sure it takes off. The competition is stiff; this is a corner of Suffolk that's recently been identified – in *The Independent*, no less – as a gastro-cluster. During the summer, when the village is full of visitors, the Brasserie can more than hold its own. But in wind-lashed winter, the kitchen will need to raise its game if it's going to lure diners away from the local gastropubs.

Despite some inconsistency in the cooking, though, it's hard to wish the Brasserie anything but well. It may be idiosyncratic, even a bit mad, but as proved by the visitors who still flock to Thorpeness nearly a century after it was created, just because something is a folly doesn't necessarily mean it's a mistake. \*



by Madeleine Lim

**THE ANCHOR**  
Sophie Dorber cooks wonderfully at this dream of a seaside pub, making inventive use of local fish and meat, while husband Mark matches each dish on the menu to the perfect wine or beer.  
*Main St, Walberswick (01502 722112)*

**THE CROWN**  
The award-winning cuisine at this inn includes Gressingham duck breast with basil creamed potato, Savoy cabbage and bacon lardons with a raspberry sauce.  
*Westleton, Nr Southwold (01728 648777)*

**KESGRAVE HALL**  
This Grade II-listed mansion is now a fashionable new restaurant with rooms; chef Stuart Oliver puts fine local ingredients to good use in his European-style menu.  
*Hall Road, Kesgrave, Ipswich (01473 333741)*

**LAVENHAM GREAT HOUSE**  
A three-course meal at this acclaimed French restaurant costs £26.95; mains include a red tuna loin on a butternut squash, celeriac and coriander mash.  
*Market Place, Lavenham (01787 247431)*