



AA Gill
TABLE
TALK

The BT man put his head round the door and asked me to check if the broadband was still working. I typed the first thing that came into my head. And — cherkunk! (or whatever noise the internet is supposed to make) — there it was. A screen full of AA Gill.

On my life, I've never Googled myself; not because I'm not inquisitive, but because I know that for weak, impressionable souls (and I count myself among the ranks of the morally frail), that way lies inflatable lunacy. An unfeasible and vaunting self-regard is the most common corollary affliction of seeing your name in print too often. It is the one thing that all writers, and particularly journalists, should rigorously scrub off, along with Toad-like imperatives to poop-poop down columns offering new dawns, hands of destiny, decisive moments and open letters entitled "J'accuse".

Maintaining a head whose circumference doesn't count as special needs at Lock the hatter is essential and spiritual hygiene for all of us who appear in print. So I don't auto-Google. I don't read the reviews on Amazon, and I certainly don't write them. I won't blog, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, gyre or gimble.

It was with mild surprise that I saw on Google that I belong to an agency offering motivational leadership talks by people "who have achieved something well above expectations in life"

(boy, were they misinformed). There's a picture of me and a biography. Apparently, my reviews "are famously short of detail about the food itself", but I'm an international speaker, event host, author, television and style critic, and may be rented for ads and endorsements, after-dinner speaking, awards-hosting and conference closures. I bet I'm a whizz at closing conferences.

Without further ado, unaccustomed as I am, let me say straight away that I've never heard of these bastards. I've never done any one of those things. But that's not what irked. Apparently, I'm yours for between £4,001 and £7,000. Boris Johnson is anyone's for between £7,000 and £10,000 (which, incidentally, is not what I've heard). What's Boris going to motivate you to do? Apologise amusingly?

Almost everyone on the agency's list is a sportsman, an adventurer or a former general. There's a smattering of journalists and TV personalities, Bob Geldof, and David Thomas, a Guinness world memory record-holder. (I'm not sure what's motivational about knowing who won the FA Cup in 1932, although at two grand, he might be worth booking as a ringer for the pub quiz.)

Looking at the list of exceptional overachievers, I'm struck by how little we have actually achieved. Out of the hundreds of

vaguely celebrated names, we really haven't propelled the sum of human accomplishment and happiness an inch. We've filled telly and papers with nonsense, run a millisecond faster, jumped a pubic whisper higher, plodded through nowhere a bit longer. It's a desperately depressing view of what men in suits imagine is an inspiration or an achievement. There are no artists, no composers, no novelists, no poets, architects, designers or craftsmen, no scientists, no philosophers, no academics and no divines. Inspirational motivation for business people is restricted to muscle, endurance, looks, ephemera and killing people. I can think of few things that are as uninspiring and demotivating as that.

Now, on to my famously insufficient bit about the food. As I walked into Olivomare, I was met by the drawstring smile of Anya Hindmarch (she who makes the beautiful luggage) and her handbag husband, James. "You're not to be horrible about this place — we love it," she said. "You hate everything. You have to be nice about here. It's fantastic." Be careful what you ask for, I replied. If I give it a good review, you may never eat here again. Her face was an inspirational clutch of self-interest and altruism.

The room is the best new dining room I've seen for years. One wall boasts a big, bold mural of interlocking fish, like a Diane von Furstenberg print. There's a long, central light that might be white seaweed or a gang-bang of albino squid. There's a contemporary wooden screen and the back wall is sinuously carved plaster. Everything is white and pristine. It is instantly chic without being clinical, smart but jolly and comfortable, if a little reverberant.

The Blonde had spent the afternoon adding guests to our table like Lego, until they had to move us, with surprisingly good grace. The staff are all charm and sultry pulchritude. I've always thought that equal-opportunities legislation should make an exception for waiters and allow restaurants to employ them by prettiness — it's such an important part of the ambience.

The menu is fish and essentially Sardinian. The Blonde and I started with a bowl of fresh, raw sea urchin on ice, with warm toast, which is simply a perfect, unimprovable dish. Next, I had a soup of *fregola* (Sardinian couscous), clams, garlic and tomato. The dish was unusual, mysterious, hot and compulsive. The Blonde had a baby-octopus stew made with bay leaves, chilli and tomato: *moscardini piccanti*, a deep and rich, almost chocolatey confection of unctuous cephalopod. I also had a brick of hake with garlic, vinegar, parsley and a spike of chilli (there's a lot of heat in Sardinia), served with boiled potatoes. Again, simple, but with panache.

Sardinian food often has a mordant edge to it, a taste of regret and resentment, of loss and vendetta. Some places just do make food that is more than sustenance, that contains a regional therapy, a potted history. Sardinian cooking is an insistent, complex mix of indecent proposal, kidnap demand and a poem written to the Samaritans. It's one of the exposed places of gastronomy, where dinner is plainly more than the food.

For pudding, we had the best tiramisu (a dish I dislike) I've eaten in London; a delicate lemon cream with caramelised orange zest; and *sebada*, the olive oil-fried pasties of cheese dripped with honey. (If you've never had them, run, don't walk.) The table liked the puddings so much, they ordered them all again.

Main courses all cost less than £20, starters about £10. Dinner was very, very good. It's a very good restaurant. And I'm going to give it five stars, because it also has sisters: Oliveto, which makes constantly brilliant pizzas that have been feeding my kids for a decade, and the original Olivo. This is an exemplary way to grow local restaurants, a small chain that serves a loyal community without ever losing quality or consistency or its sense of place, either where it comes from or where it is.

There you are, Anya — you've eaten your last meal here. □

PHIL STARLING

OLIVOMARE
★★★★★

10-12 Lower Belgrave Street, SW1; 020 7730 9022
Mon-Sat: lunch, noon-2.30pm; dinner, 7pm-11pm

★★★★★ Catch of the day ★★★★★ Dab hand ★★★★★ Name that tuna ★★★★★ A bit fishy ★★★★★ Swimming with the fishes