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The Reconnoisseur: Daily intelligence

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I know why I prefer inns to pubs, but explaining it to foreign friends is another matter. Instead we take them, if we can, to the Crown Hotel at Wells-next-the-Sea in northeast Norfolk. Here is a vivacious, thriving demonstration of how things should be done. Ask for a kir, glass of champagne or cappuccino and the cheerful barman will produce one without mirth or overcharging. Yet this is no chi-chi conversion for urban sophisticates, but an old inn patronised by lifeboatmen, farmers and yachties in an old-fashioned seaside town blessed with two fish and chip shops but no big supermarket or petrol station.

The blackboard offers fishy classics, often with an Asian undertow. Dishes might include the day's catch served in Thai watermelon curry. In winter we enjoy casseroled venison from nearby Holkham Estate with creamy mash. Three courses costs just £12.50, from Sunday to Thursday, lunch and dinner. There is also a slightly more formal restaurant. Chef Chris Coubrough modestly attributes success to the quality of local butcher Arthur Howell's meat and the fresh seafood that the fishermen bring in.

Why does the Crown work where East Anglian pubs can feel unwelcoming of outsiders or just anonymous? The ownership may have something to do with it. On

his travels from New Zealand, Chris Coubrough met and married Jo from Suffolk. Local residents formed a small syndicate to support them in restoring the then somewhat dilapidated Crown overlooking the green. The understanding was that it would not simply surrender to the tourist trade – Wells has one of the best beaches in England – but make its first responsibility to serve the town. So when we stay in one of the 12 ensuite bedrooms or two family suites (rooms from £90) we are as likely to pass on the stairs overflow guests of Wells families as travellers from afar. Think local, eat global.