

Mary-Lou outside the Seaside Boarding House with Red her greyhound



A Stylish Seaside ENTERPRISE

Mary-Lou Sturridge is bringing a dash of London Groucho Club glamour to the Dorset coast with the creation of 'a restaurant with rooms' out of a Victorian cliff-top villa in Burton Bradstock

WORDS BY CHARLOTTE STARLING PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATHARINE DAVIES

Mary-Lou Sturridge stands on the steps of the former Burton Cliff Hotel and surveys the spectacular sweep of Chesil Beach and Lyme Bay below: "I scoured the entire South Coast from Sussex to Cornwall for the perfect location," she says, "and this is exceptional."

Scheduled to open its doors early next summer, The Seaside Boarding House Restaurant and Bar will see the transformation of a rather shabby Victorian villa on the cliff-top at Burton Bradstock into a fabulously chic 'restaurant with rooms', catering for locals, London weekenders and tourists alike. Describing the current appearance of the building as "*Crossroads*

meets the *Addams Family*," Mary-Lou has big plans for it. "I want it to look like an Edward Hopper painting."

Sturridge and her business partner, Anthony Mackintosh, first spied the hotel in 2007 in the pages of *Country Life* when it was still running as a B&B. "The interiors were all salmon pink, it had a real old people's home vibe," recalls Mary-Lou. But

“We are aiming to create simple and classic dining- somewhere for locals to come for a celebration dinner but also able to provide guests with a hamper of local crab sandwiches for a picnic”



Inside the bar area

the couple immediately saw its potential. “We do seaside hotels rather badly in this country. There are very few which are affordable, which also offer great service and levels of comfort. I want to change that.”

Slim and elegant, with a mop of wavy brown hair and sparkling sea-blue eyes, Mary-Lou has a formidable track record in the hospitality industry. For many years she was the iconic figurehead of London’s famous media haunt, The Groucho Club. This exclusive Soho members’ club, beloved of the arty crowd and infamous for its wild parties, was co-founded by Mackintosh and is where Mary-Lou cut her teeth as general manager and then managing director. Since the press got wind of their new project at Burton Bradstock, they have delighted in dubbing it The Groucho-on-Sea.

Keen to move on from London and spread her wings, Mary-Lou conceived the idea of a string of Seaside Boarding House Restaurant and Bars along the South Coast, offering top-notch service combined with a laidback atmosphere. Plans were submitted for a complete overhaul and reconfiguration of the Burton Cliff Hotel but when it became clear that the plans for a brand new 27-bedroomed hotel on the site were not going to be accepted, they decided to go back to the drawing board - literally.

Despite this rethink, council planners

seemed to be stalling until West Dorset MP Oliver Letwin stepped in to lend his support. “West Dorset’s economy depends heavily on tourism, and we have seen welcome increases in the number of people wanting to see the wonders of our heritage coastline,” he says, adding, “I think a reinvigorated hotel at this fantastic location can play a big part in that.”

The hotel is one of two matching cliff-top villas constructed between 1885 and 1890 as summer residences for the Pitt Rivers family who owned much of the village of Burton Bradstock. The buildings were originally called Alpha and Omega; the other villa is home to musician Billy Bragg and his wife.

The hotel has had an interesting and chequered history having served variously as a guesthouse, hotel and retirement home. During World War II it was requisitioned by the Army to house Polish escapees who had joined the RAF.

Mary-Lou has a clear idea of what she wants the end result of the hotel’s transformation to be, which will involve a fair amount of restructuring to achieve an understated modern classic design. To oversee the project she has brought in renowned architect and restaurant designer, and co-founder of The Groucho, Tchaik Chassay.

To take advantage of its dramatic >



SEASIDE BOARDING HOUSE



Above: One of the quirky seaside inspired pieces

cliff-top location the facade of the hotel will feature huge glass windows and pale green clapperboard on its bottom half. There will be a wide terrace where guests can relax, sipping drinks on sunny days. Inside, running the full length of the hotel, will be an impressive open plan restaurant and bar areas, affording every seat a sea view. The glass doors and windows will frame the ever-changing seascape, so whatever the weather, there will be something to see.

Currently a venue for hire for occasional weddings, film screenings (it recently hosted a pop-up screening of Kubrik's *The Shining* during Bridport's Page to to Screen Film Festival), and parties, the interior of the hotel has been whitewashed throughout, and sparsely furnished with quirky vintage finds, junk shop sofas and chintz lampshades. There is a dance floor complete with glitter ball and a bar fronted by giant yuccas and fairy lights which lends a *Hi-de-Hi* meets *Famous Five* ambience.

With her white canvas pumps, bare tanned legs and clipped vowels, and flanked by her two black greyhounds Red and Green, Mary-Lou could be an Enid Blyton creation herself - until she starts explaining her vision for the Seaside Boarding House. It soon becomes clear that she is a thoroughly modern businesswoman.

Working with the light which floods the interior, the décor, she explains, will be simple in style but of beautiful quality. The floors will be bleached wood, the furniture a mix of antique and contemporary, and there will be some great art on the walls, but everything pared back and emphatically not grand. "It's important that people feel they

can come to eat here in jeans or in a taffeta ball-dress, and neither will feel out of place. Either way, they will feel loved and gorgeous."

Mary-Lou is keen to point out there will be no membership policy, the restaurant and bar will be open all day to everyone. But given her past career, inevitably there will be some clubby elements, like a snug library for residents with armchairs to curl up in. "Overall," she explains, "I want guests to feel like they're in someone's home, but without too much clutter." To this end the seven en-suite bedrooms will have window seats, large beds piled high with pillows, books to read and radios to listen to, plus all the mod-cons - such as Wi-Fi - which are expected by guests these days.

Realistic about the vagaries of the British climate, Mary-Lou knows that the Seaside Boarding House must be as appealing on hot sunny days and as it will be on wet, wintery ones. "When you think of the British seaside, tropical weather doesn't immediately spring to mind," she smiles wryly, "but for me that's part of the appeal; being cosy inside watching a storm is just as much a part of our seaside holidays as a day on the beach."

Food is another important aspect of the project and Mary-Lou plans to snare a chef, "who is just as interested in making jams as they are in sourcing meat from local farms." The kitchen is the heartbeat of this business and Mary-Lou's recipe for success is "a good chef, a good vibe and good service" and of course, being in West Dorset, there is a wealth of fabulous local produce.

"We're not going to be a 'fish' restaurant because we've already got those nearby with

"I want it to look like an Edward Hopper painting"



The interior of the hotel has been painted white while it's in this transition phase

The interior of the hotel has been whitewashed throughout, and sparsely furnished with the odd quirky vintage find



Architects drawings of the Seaside Boarding House

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Mark Hix's Oyster & Fish House and The Hive. We are aiming to create simple and classic dining - somewhere for locals to come for a celebration dinner but where guests can also have a hamper of local crab sandwiches for a picnic."

To ensure the best possible level of service, Mary-Lou intends to oversee the staff training, and she is keen to point out that this new venture will offer employment opportunities in the local area.

"I don't see why you shouldn't be able to get a fabulous martini served in Dorset and it's my intention to achieve that with well-trained staff," she says, thumping the table to make her point.

Another Groucho habitué, celebrity chef

and Dorset boy, Mark Hix, is on the board of advisors. "It's a fantastic location, bang on the seaside with direct access to some of the UK's finest produce," he enthuses. "We're surprisingly short on decent hotel rooms round here, so the Seaside Boarding House can only be a good thing."

The management team's cool club credentials will undoubtedly draw a hip London crowd to rub shoulders with the local beau monde, but should we expect something a little more sedate than the Groucho Club?

Probably not. Surveying the huge dance-floor with a mischievous grin, Mary-Lou says: "We don't have enough dancing round here, that's for sure..." ■



Opening 2014

The Seaside Boarding House
Restaurant & Bar
Cliff Road, Burton Bradstock
Dorset, DT6 4RB
Email: info@theseasideboardinghouse.com
Website: theseasideboardinghouse.com