



Oysters? No, Thanks!

You may recall how Ged persuaded me to go to London for Valentine's weekend last year. Not a great success.

After posting a picture of a heart-shaped diamond on Facebook asking if anyone would care to purchase it so we would have a bit of spending money, lo and behold, a masked gang tried to smash their way into Ged's shop and pinch it. This year we'll be staying at home.

"Let's get a bottle of fizz and some oysters from Morrison's then," declared my beloved.

Mmmm, oysters; irresistible essence of the sea. I always say yes to oysters but with fear and trepidation do I slide those bivalves down my throat. I know what they can do and I don't mean their aphrodisiac effect. Believe me there's nothing romantic about throwing up and writhing around the floor in agony begging to die. I refer to my Valentine's Day Massacre of 1997.

Back then I was working at South Devon Catering College during the day and had a little restaurant in the evenings.

On the morning of Valentine's Day I was buying oysters for the restaurant and thought: "Why not buy a few dozen more and give an oyster shucking demonstration at the college?"

I forced my oysters on every poor sod who walked through the doors of the Catering Department and then moved on to poison my own restaurant customers.

There was nothing about the oysters' appearance, smell or taste to hint at the dangers lurking within their juicy flesh - and I should know because I ate ten.

My partner Jackie, who was particularly reluctant to eat a 'snotty blob,' spat her oyster out the minute I tipped it into her mouth but it didn't save her from the nightmare that was to come. Jackie was just as ill as I was, even though she hadn't even swallowed her oyster.

As my typical luck would have it, our

local Environmental Health Inspector had dined in my restaurant for Valentine's Day.



I prayed that she was OK and hoped beyond hope that not all the oysters were infected. Maybe just mine and Jackie's were the dodgy ones? Maybe not.

"It was a particularly nasty case of norovirus"

We were into our second day of near-death experience when the health inspector called. Both she and her partner had taken a trip to hospital where samples (yes, those kinds of samples) were taken to determine exactly what the killer oysters were carrying. It was a



particularly nasty case of norovirus, and the EHO gave strict instructions that I should stay away from the college

and restaurant for at least a week to make sure I didn't pass the virus on by breathing over the food. As it happened, the college and restaurant were deserted for the next week so no-one missed me.

Back to this Valentine's Day and Ged-the-husband's kindly offer. "I think I'd rather have a bottle of Champagne and a pearl instead of the oysters, darling," said I.

You see I'm presently having a bit of a love affair with pearls after visiting the Victoria and Albert Museum for the most amazing exhibition ever, simply entitled 'Pearls'.

All that lustre and luminous, swirling colour. There were some real crackers on show including the pearl earring worn by King Charles I to his execution in 1649.

The kids loved the idea of a man getting ready to have his head chopped off and fussing about wearing his pearl earring. When Charles's head was sewn back on to his body for burial, the earring was removed and sent to his daughter,

Mary. Lovely. I just hope someone washed it first.

My favourite pieces at the exhibition were the crazy brooches made from curiously shaped baroque pearls;

ballerinas, fat babies, freaky fish and the ostrich pictured here.

"Have you got any of those weird pearls in your workshop?" I asked in a hopeful, hinting fashion.

"Yes, as it happens. I've been collecting them for years. The best one is a black pearl that looks like a devil's head."

Now that would have been an entirely appropriate pearl to find in those killer oysters of 1997. Who would dare to eat an oyster that held a pearl

in the image of the devil's head? Not me.

