



SOUTH OF THE BORDER

The message was clear. It came in the form of an email: “The Ensenada Race starts at noon on Friday April 26th. Your berth on “It’s OK!” awaits. The tickets follow separately.”

TEXT BY BOB FISHER PHOTOS BY MARY LONGPRE

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Start of the Ensenada Race; It's OK!; pure concentration in the light stuff; running to the finish

Newport Beach is on the Californian coast, north of San Diego, and it's some six thousand miles away from home for me. We have been joking about this for several years; Andy Rose, one of the triumvirate of owners of the Alan Andrews-designed 'It's OK!', and myself, generally each time we meet at an America's Cup Hall of Fame induction. Andy, a US citizen, sailed aboard Australia as tactician to Noel Robins in 1977 and caused a minor furore at the New York Yacht Club, until it was firmly pointed out by Alan Bond that there was nothing in the rules to prevent it.

But I digress. Last year, after the AC Hall of Fame induction, Andy held a dinner party in the 12-Metre Room at the Candy Store on Bannister's Wharf in Newport, Rhode Island, to which my wife and I were invited. It was a very jolly affair and in the middle of it, Andy stood up to address the assembled multitude (which included many of It's OK!'s crew) and looked straight at me and said: “Guys, The Fish is joining us for the Ensenada Race next year!”

The good lady wife smiled and gave the OK (how appropriate) for me to join the crew. We both thought no more of it until the email arrived, but it was the tickets that sealed the deal. I arrived with a couple of days to acclimatise and meet the crew again before joining the boat in Balboa harbour. The two days were not wasted – I had to prepare myself fully for the rigours of a race on this all-carbon

50-footer. The training was intense, but I had to learn what was expected of me.

There was another guest crew member – David Vietor, also a refugee from the 12-Metre era of the America's Cup – and he arrived the morning after me, but he was no stranger to the boat and the race and knew what was expected. I, however, was learning, and learning fast, and should have been fully prepared when I was given a preview of the Bill of Fare for the race - but I most certainly wasn't.

To explain: the Ensenada Race follows the coast, missing the Coronado Islands, to finish in the Mexican town that gives the race its name, after a downhill slide. The total distance is 124 miles. Starting in the middle of the day guarantees sailing in the hours of darkness and I would not be following the advice given to me years ago by Uffa Fox, who said: “If you are racing out of sight of land, in the hours of darkness, make sure that you have at least one foot of waterline length for every year of your age.” He meant it, but there aren't so many boats doing ocean races that qualify for me these days.

I was, however, prepared to make allowances after learning what was in store in the way of comestibles. While It's OK! does run to a fridge, deep freeze and a microwave, it doesn't sit 14 (the total number of the crew) around the dinner table and so the solid food was to be in the form of Tapas. The courses ranged widely and varied, but what caught my eye was that on

the facing page was the Carte des Vins and these were paired to the courses and were listed in serving order!

We met at the boat at 0700. I had been warned that there would be more than two hundred boats starting (there were 203) and that we would be in the last but one class away – only the multihulls to follow. What I hadn't accounted for was the number of spectator craft of all shapes and sizes.

Came our turn and Tom (another of the trio of owners) steered her straight for the favoured end of the line and arrived there spot on time. There's nothing like gaining the best start for putting one in the right mood for any race, but grinding your closest rivals into the dirt does even more. We could have raised a glass, but nothing was being served at this stage.

There was a pleasant ten-knot breeze from 253 degrees, and the course to the first waypoint was 144. We were trickling along nicely close to wind speed and there was promise (from the forecasters) of a shade more and that it would back slightly. The moment it did, combined with a course change to 134, the half-ounce kite was set and It's OK! took off with the speed showing around 14 knots.

It was then that I received an invitation to steer. Should I demur or should I move behind the wheel? No contest. It was then that I found that Alan Andrews had done a magnificent job and as luck would have it, the breeze continued to increase and with it the boat speed. After a little more than an hour, I handed the wheel back to the owners and took up my position on the weather rail with a 16.4 best speed. Time for weather-rail chat.

The breeze continued to increase and that was when the boat displayed the results of its only failing. The rudder is on the small side when under pressure – it is perfect in light to medium breeze, and to windward in anything, but presents problems when power reaching. The stalling-out can only be cured by rapid and large movements of the wheel to re-establish the flow across the blade. Those in the know showed how it was done and round-ups were very few.

We ploughed on, and when the evening sunset began it was time for tapas and beverages. First up were the steamed

artichokes with herb aioli accompanied by an un-oaked Chardonnay. Then followed fresh gulf prawns with ginger horseradish sauce, and then the lobster empanadillas with avocado sauce. Somewhere about this time the wine changed to a barrel-fermented Chardonnay. And so it went on through another five courses (with three more wines) to the desserts that included Key Lime tartlets and chocolate truffles. All the time the boat was on course and flying. That's my kind of sailing – such a pity it's not like this in the Solent.

There had to be something to go wrong, and we had been warned that around midnight there was a likely change in the breeze. It happened when we were seven miles short of the finishing line and could see the lights of the committee vessel on station. The breeze shut off completely with nine minutes to go to midnight. The bigger boats and multihulls had finished and we saw our chances of glory flicker away in the reflections in the dark mirror-like sea. It took two hours of painful progress and much sail trimming before we crossed the line.

Then the engine failed to start and the Boat Captain looked anxiously at the owners - but they are an amiable bunch, and hailed the next boat to finish for a tow into the marina. Maybe that's when a sensible sailor should have left, but I was to learn that the race is simply a means of gathering a big group of sailors for a party – and the awards were two days away. There were other delights to sample, not the least the one-armed croquet tournament (the other arm mandatorily supports a wine glass that is constantly replenished).

Where did we finish? It was a big boat race – the wind shut-off saw to that and a big trimaran took the major prize. We were fourth in class and ninth overall – nothing to complain about.

Finally, we left this Mexican resort after three days of parties and I was dropped from the motor launch in San Diego to head for the airport and home with the final order ringing in my ears: “See you next year, Fish.” Outline planning permission granted, but what of that from the loving wife? We'll see. 🍷

