

# Sporting chances



Head chef Stephen Harris (centre) with his brigade of two: Jim Shave (left) and Dan Flavell



Stephen Harris (left) with local chicken producer Willie McKeever

The end of the road is a new beginning, if you turn and go the other way. Stephen Harris turned his professional life around at the Sportsman, as Fiona Sims discovers

**T**AKE the Seasalter turn-off, then drive until you think the road runs out," explains Stephen Harris, chef of the Sportsman, near Whitstable, Kent. He's not wrong. Once you get past a windswept caravan park, you're on your own, with nothing between you and the Isle of Sheppey but miles of shingle and a few beach huts.

So the multitude of cars parked outside the pub comes as a bit of a surprise. People travel miles to dine at the Sportsman, a Shepherd Neame-tied pub reopened two years ago under new licensees – Harris and his brother Phillip.

At first things were kept simple – just three starters, mains and puds chalked up on the blackboard behind the bar, with Stephen alone in the kitchen and Phillip behind the bar. But Stephen had plans, and he needed help. So, after a few good months, he took on a sous chef, Dan Flavell. "I have lots of ideas, and he's great at putting things into practice," Harris says. You see, Harris has had no formal training. He was a teacher first, then he worked for a financial services company, taking clients out to the likes of Chez Nico and Marco Pierre White, and he holidayed in California, dropping in at the French Laundry and Chez Panisse.

"I developed an obsession with food," he explains. "It got to the point where I had to think about what I really wanted to do." So he thought he'd try being a chef. He worked first for a friend at his fish restaurant

in Suffolk, then at the Fire Station in London's Waterloo, before returning to his home in Whitstable and, eventually, to a job as sous chef at the Royal Native Oyster Stores. "I've never looked back," he says.

Positive press has steadily rolled in – the latest being a review by Jay Rayner in the *Observer* – and Harris is having fun. "It's a good lifestyle," he says. "I turn up at 10am and I don't mess around with the ingredients too much."

Most days the pub-restaurant does about 60 covers. On a recent Sunday, starters included asparagus soup, soft-boiled egg and asparagus tips (£4.95) and rock oysters and hot chorizo (£1 each), with mains such as seared thornback ray and balsamic vinaigrette (£11.95) and braised pork belly stuffed with black pudding and crackling (£12.95), and desserts including rhubarb sorbet and burnt cream (£4.95).

Harris has also set aside a budget for eating out, taking his brigade of two up to London regularly. Consequently, his food often pays homage to other well-known chefs. For example, he uses "space dust" in the rhubarb sorbet, in the style of Heston Blumenthal at the Fat Duck in Bray, Berkshire.

"The fact that I come back with ideas is obvious," Harris says. "We do get people coming in here saying, 'Wot, no chips?' and my brother gives them a withering look. But we're a pub in the middle of nowhere, and I've got the 'grey pound' to consider. I like to think I'm offering them modern country cooking without scaring them off." ■

The Sportsman, Faversham Road, Seasalter, Whitstable, Kent. Tel: 01227 273370

## A selection from the menu at the Sportsman

- Smoked eel, soda bread, horseradish and lamb's lettuce, £6.95
- Port and prune terrine, £5.50
- Salmon cured in vodka and lemon with sorrel, £5.50
- Crispy duck, smoked chilli salsa and sour cream, £10.95
- Grilled Dover sole and tartare sauce, £14.95
- Turbot braised in vin jaune with morels, £16.95
- Roast Monkhill Farm chicken, asparagus and chanterelles, £11.95
- Hinxden Dairy untreated Jersey cream and treacle tart, £4.95
- Coffee parfait, vanilla shortbread and Earl Grey granita, £4.95