



MILLAR'S MEALS

Peter Millar reviews two very different Kentish pubs where the emphasis is firmly on fish and the local ales

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There is, buried just beneath the surface of the British psyche, like toes covered with sand on a blustery beach, a dreadful image of the seaside pub. It is a dingy place, with flaking paintwork, corroded by the salty sea air, threadbare carpet and a 'bill of fare' that boasts pickled whelks and Watney's Red Barrel. I suspect it is a kind of folk memory whose roots go back to the Fifties and post-war poverty, when 'You've never had it so good' was an acknowledgement of how bad things had been relatively recently. There was a moment – just a moment – turning up at The Sportsman on the north Kent coast, where little wooden chalets sit bravely on the Swale shelf, when I looked at the pub's bleak location and thought I had accidentally drifted back in time.

I could not have been more mistaken. To appreciate what The Sportsman has become, you have to reacquire the romantic vision our coastline once evoked. Down here they call it 'the Oyster coast', and a little book on sale at the bar of The Sportsman details the birds that populate it – curlews, teals, grey plovers, godwits and skuas – all at home in the shallows along with the sea lavender and golden samphire, wild carrots and yellow-horned poppies that in season brighten the edges of the sand and shingle beach. Wild and windswept it may be, but when the sun comes out it could be Malibu, and the little chalets weekend hideaways for movie stars.

They would not be disappointed by The Sportsman. Inside, the stripped pine floor and sturdy tables, hand-built from reclaimed wood, create an irresistible atmosphere of relaxed spaciousness. In August, with hanging baskets braving the salt breeze, and sunshine pouring into the open conservatory, the place had a nautical, holiday atmosphere.



The food leans suitably towards the maritime, though not exclusively. I was pleased to see the plump lambs fattening on the salty grass in the fields all around represented on the menu. But, in homage to the seaside spirit, I went for the thornback ray (a large skate) served with a spicy salsa of fresh tomatoes. My 16-year-old son chose the crispy duck which, in contrast to the oriental style, managed to be meltingly tender inside a light, golden, almost flimsily crisp skin. Both were served on a medley of steamed greens with a few firm, lightly boiled potatoes.

We started with a mixed antipasti that included a selection of cold meats, chutney, black olives, pickled gherkins, tomato bread, anchovies, salad leaves, and a house speciality: oysters with warm chorizo. I have never tasted anything quite like it. The fusion of tastes was remarkable: cold, wet, warm, salty and spicy all at once. They are also served as a dish in their own right; next time I might be tempted. One other item deserves a mention: a proliferation of cold cockles – not tasting of the vinegary preserve that has ruined what was once a national institution but *au naturel*.

Not having the world's sweetest tooth, I opted for a simple dessert of pecorino cheese and a few grapes. But there was much enthusiasm for the strawberry gratin – a ball of homemade vanilla ice cream drowned in strawberries and sabayon (a sweet custard), then toasted under the grill.

Like most modern pubs, The Sportsman serves perfectly acceptable wines by the glass and has a reasonably priced selection of bottles from Europe and the New World. But an added attraction (we are in England after all) is the good range of ales from Shepherd Neame, the sole remaining sizable brewer in our most famous >