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The menu at The Sportsman is a pick-and-mix of dishes pinched from the country's top chefs. But, says **Jay Rayner**, they should be flattered

The Sportsman, Faversham Road, Seasalter, Whitstable, Kent (01227 273 370). Meal for two, including wine and service, £60

The first telephone number I found outside a deserted Whitstable station, while searching for a cab company to call, was for the Samaritans. It seemed horribly appropriate. A gunmetal sky hung low over the north Kent coast town, and a sparse, stinging rain was blowing in off the estuary. The cab ride out across the dull marshlands didn't raise the mood much. I began to wish I'd punched that Samaritans number into my mobile just in case.

Then I made it through the doors of the Sportsman, and things perked up hugely. A gentle white light suffused a room stripped back from its pub beginnings to the essentials: bare floorboards, bare wood tables and plain walls, broken by the odd dash of colour from photographs of the local shore. It could stand as a metaphor for the highly accomplished food served here.

I had heard on the grapevine that the chef, Stephen Harris, takes his small team to eat in London's grandest, in search of ideas. I was fascinated to see how the experience of eating the food of, say, Gordon Ramsay or Heston Blumenthal might influence the dishes served by a self-taught chef in a Kentish pub. Which probably makes me sound like a patronising git, and correctly so, for my imagination had failed me.

Harris is upfront about his borrowings and influences, and he can easily afford to be because he adds an extra dimension all his own. He strips this complex food of the mannered service it is assumed to need. You order at the bar, along with the bloke getting his pint of bitter. One waitress brings your food.

This being the Whitstable coast, I thought it important to kick off with a few oysters with hot chorizo at £7 each. It is a fabulous combination: the brine-burst of the oyster is followed by the sweet, dense muskiness of the fermented pork. It



is, Harris told me, a direct lift from the Fire Station in south London, where he had his first job, but it seems much more appropriate here hard by the sea. For my starter proper, I chose 'asparagus soup with a soft-boiled egg': a miniature mug of an intense green soup plus, in its own egg cup, a perfectly soft-boiled egg and some home-made soda-bread soldiers. This is tactile comfort food that demands your attention. A sip of soup here, a dip of soldier there. Apparently the multistarred überchef Alain Ducasse does



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something like this, but I bet he can't match the blissful understatement.

The main course was braised pork belly, rolled and stuffed with black pudding. The influence is a dish at Marcus Wareing's Petrus, but it is improved on by a shard of divinely crisp crackling. The pork could have done with more liquor to lubricate the fibrous meat, but that is a quibble. I was given the option to try small servings of a number of desserts, the stars of which were a gooey treacle tart, a zestful blood-orange ice cream and, best of all, a rhubarb sorbet. It contained a sprinkling of popping candy (better known as Space Dust) which just emphasised the tartness of the fruit. (Not every Sportsman customer approved; one elderly lady thought her false teeth were falling out.)

The wine list is sensibly short, and almost 80 per cent comes in at under £20. Service is efficient. But what is most striking is the sense of engagement. The staff know what they are doing is good; that they have made an isolated pub buzz; that, most importantly, they are having fun. It's very unlikely that anybody working or eating here will ever be nipping down to the station to get the number for the Samaritans. **OM** jay.rayner@observer.co.uk

Sure thing: Kent's Sportsman serves up fancy food without the frills