

On the road: Kent's north-east coast

This once-gritty corner of the county has undergone a revival, especially where food is concerned. These days you're as likely to find slip sole in foraged-seaweed butter, and chicken paired with Asian-style slaw as you are fish 'n' chips and candyfloss

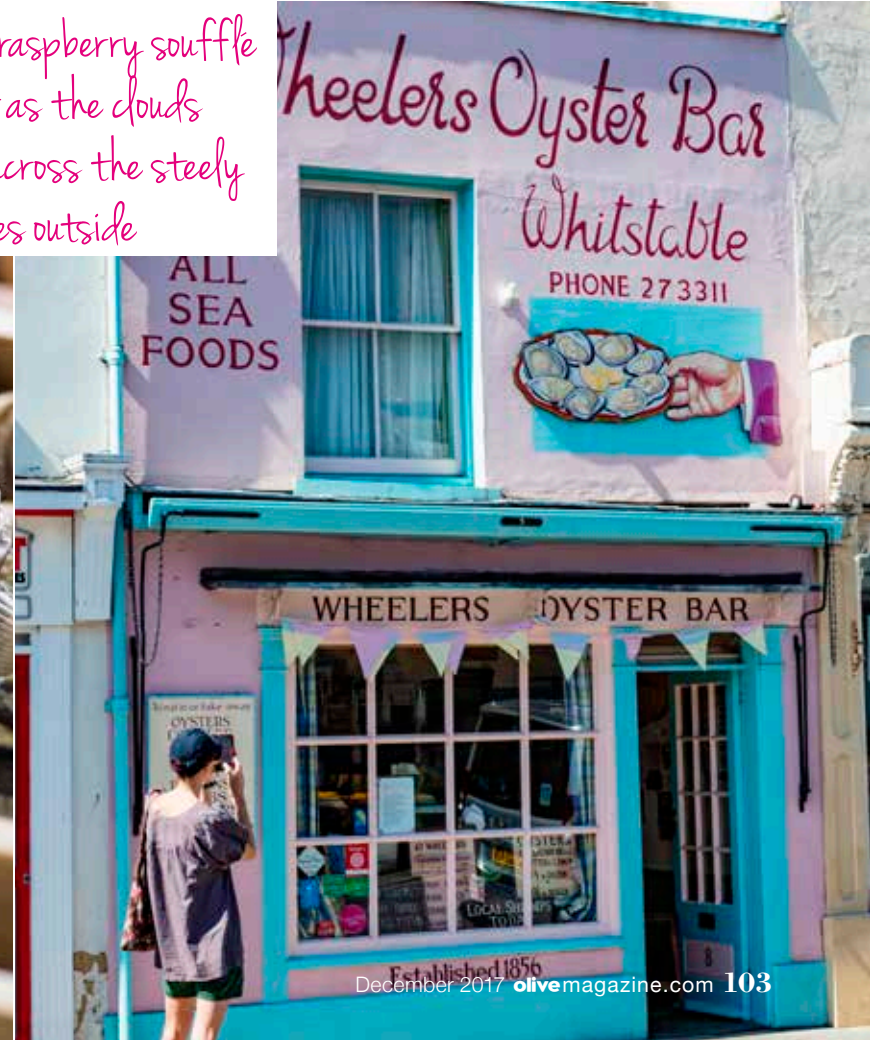
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I'm heading for a place in Seasalter, a few miles west of Whitstable, that's described in the owner's Twitter bio as a "grotty rundown pub by the sea". Not, you'd think, an obvious destination for a foodie. As I pass the holiday parks that sprawl like sea cabbage along the bleak shingle coastline and spot the boozier's ramshackle exterior, I see what he means. Inside, though, it's a different story. This is **The Sportsman**, owned by self-taught (and self-deprecating) chef Stephen Harris, whose flawless British cooking makes it one of the most hungered-after gastropubs in the country – expect to wait four or five months for a table (thesportsmanseasalter.co.uk). Treading a clever line between casual and classy, the pub's wooden floors, scrubbed pine tables and pumps of Shepherd Neame beer (brewed in nearby Faversham) maintain the feel of a rural pub (just). Likewise, when it comes to the food, there's no pretension, just locally sourced seasonal ingredients cooked simply but with an expert understanding of flavour combinations. I go for the tasting menu – supposedly nine courses, but when you include all the bouche amusement and petits fours it's more like 12, including (hurrah!) two puddings. Given the pub's proximity to Whitstable, which has farmed oysters since Roman times and has its own oyster festival, it feels appropriate

that the meal should start with the molluscs – natives au naturel if you come in winter, when they're in season, but otherwise poached and served with a rhubarb granita. The oysters are followed by slip sole in a foraged-seaweed butter, then tender Kentish lamb, specimens of which graze on the marshes right in front of the pub. Also seriously good are the homemade breads and home-churned butter (rightly honoured as a course on their own) and a raspberry soufflé as light as the clouds scudding across the skies outside. Seasalter is not the only place on the Kent coast enjoying a culinary revival (with property prices to match – beach huts next to the pub fetch over £200,000). Whitstable, once a gritty fishing port, has spawned a rich haul of cafés and restaurants to satisfy the weekend hordes of DFLs ("down from London") who scuttle east along the high-speed train line. Candyfloss-pink-fronted **Wheeler's** (wheelersoysterbar.com) may have been dishing up oysters in its parlour-sized dining room since 1856, but now it's joined by eateries like **David Brown's** deli-restaurant (davidbrowndeli.co.uk) and **Samphire** bistro (samphirewhitstable.co.uk). Another must-visit among Whitstable's clapboard houses is **The Cheese Box** (thecheesebox.co.uk), selling British cheeses (including local Ashmore, Canterbury Cobble and Kentish Blue) and, on weekend evenings, cheese platters too. >>



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OPPOSITE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): MORELLI'S ICE CREAM; WHITSTABLE BEACH HUTS; WHEELERS OYSTER BAR, WHITSTABLE; ROCK OYSTERS, PICKLED CUCUMBER AND ARUGA CAVIAR AT THE SPORTSMAN, SEASALTER

PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY; CLARE HARGREAVES; PHILIP HARRIS

Travelling east I reach the Isle of Thanet, whose skies artist JMW Turner called “the loveliest in all Europe”. After passing the vast Thanet Earth greenhouses that supply Britain’s supermarkets with veg, sandy beaches indicate I’m at my next destination: the seaside towns of Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate, all once-fashionable Victorian bathing resorts that hit the post-war doldrums but are now, like Whitstable, staging a comeback.

Margate’s transformation has been dramatic. Only a decade ago Lonely Planet dismissed the “jaded resort” as being predominantly “about amusements and chippies”, warning that outside summer it “has the melancholy air of a town past its prime”. How its fortunes have changed – largely thanks to the seafront **Turner Contemporary gallery and café**, opened in 2011 (turnercontemporary.org). Vintage shops are breathing life into the town’s pretty squares, dilapidated Georgian boarding houses are being restored and opened as stylish places to stay (bag, if you can, one of the boutique b&b rooms at **The Reading Rooms**; thereadingroomsmargate.co.uk) and its Dreamland amusement park has been returned to its former glory. Some have even started trumpeting the town as Shoreditch-on-Sea.

Happily Margate’s revival extends to its cafés and restaurants. We’re not talking fancy places but edgy eateries using local ingredients. I stop for lunch at **Hantverk & Found** (hantverk-found.co.uk), a tiny gallery-cum-café in the Old Town run by Hackney migrant Kate de Syllas, who produces an eclectic range of seafood dishes laced with worldwide spices. Choosing from a menu etched on a blackboard wall I try the seafood pastilla and black rice noodle salad with crab, seaweed and nanami togarashi spices. They’re good.

Continuing the casual vibe, **Bottega Caruso** deli-café (bottegaruso.com), inside Margate’s indoor Old Kent Market, handmakes its own organic pasta and passata (from homegrown tomatoes). **Roost** (roostrestaurant.co.uk), opposite the old lido, does a great line in ethically sourced chicken, paired with sweet potato chips and Asian-style slaw, plus bone and seaweed broth. Another hit is **GB Pizza** (greatbritishpizza.com), which produces thin-crust pizzas topped with seasonal, local ingredients that are baked in its wood-fired oven (bestseller: Margate-rita). It’s on the seafront, so you can watch those skies Turner raved about while you munch. If you’re after retro, try the macarons at **Batchelor’s Patisserie**, whose range of pastries, and décor, are exactly as they were when it was founded 50 years ago (@[BatchelorsPatisserie](https://twitter.com/BachelorsPatisserie)).

Quirkiest of the lot, though, is **Cheesy Tiger**, a diddy restaurant-takeaway run by ex-musician Tom Cawte (@[cheesytigermargate](https://twitter.com/cheesytigermargate)). Tucked inside one of the old storehouses at the far end of Margate’s Harbour Arm pier, it’s a wonderful spot from which to watch the nautical goings-on. As the name suggests, cheese (mostly British) is king. At lunchtime Tom offers small bites such as grilled cheese samies, but in the evening there are decent-sized mains including baked Tunworth with baby potatoes, pickles and chilli jelly, and biodynamic wines.

Ramsgate, also cashing in on its old-world charm, offers equally laidback eating. Despite its unpromising exterior, the current standout spot is Japanese-inspired **Kyoto**, whose chef »

RIGHT (FROM TOP): RAMSGATE HARBOUR; ANTONY GORMLEY STATUE AT MARGATE; ALBION HOUSE; BOTTEGA CARUSO’S CAPPELLETTI; DREAMLAND IN MARGATE; FETTUCCINE WITH CRAB AND TOMATOES AT BOTTEGA CARUSO. OPPOSITE: GB PIZZA





handpicks his fish at London's markets (kyotosushiandgrill.co.uk). For cool contemporary décor and historical location, **Archive Homestore** is another hit, nestled inside the arched walls overlooking Ramsgate's Royal Harbour (archivehomestore.co.uk). Here, farmer's daughter Naomi Grady offers quiches and cakes, handmade from ethically sourced local ingredients. Or, for a vinyl and vegan vibe, head to **Vinyl Head** café-cum-record store in Ramsgate's Georgian heart (@vinylheadramsgate). A few streets away, down by the harbour, is my hotel for the night: **Albion House**, a stunningly refurbished 18th-century mansion that's been turned into a 14-bedroom boutique hotel (albionhouseramsgate.co.uk).

In terms of food, however, it's demure little Broadstairs, sandwiched between the two '-gates', that's the unlikely star of this coastal corner. Since 1932 it's housed a **Morelli's** ice-cream parlour (morellisgelato.com) and, since 2009, it has hosted a food festival so successful that it now runs twice yearly (broadstairsfoodfestival.org.uk).

At glass-fronted **Wyatt & Jones** I watch fishing boats entering Viking Bay as I enjoy the restaurant's wholesome Kentish food, including pig's head terrine and spiced scallops with chickpeas (wyattandjones.co.uk). The biggest draw here, though, is the Sunday brunch and roast lunch. Making serious culinary waves nearby is tiny, spartan **Stark** (starkfood.co.uk), owned and run by the super-talented Ben Crittenden who previously cooked at the Michelin-starred West House in Biddenden. As the name suggests, you don't come here for plush surroundings but for "good food, laid bare". Currently its only offering is a six-course evening tasting menu, which Ben somehow magics up from a space no bigger than a broom cupboard (pictured above right). I start with a plate of mackerel, watermelon and beetroot that looks like a Kandinsky painting (secret ingredient: watermelon jam), then make my way through

everything, from smoked cuttlefish and spiced lamb to jasmine custard. But the hands-down winner is course number two, a duck terrine with hazelnut and ginger biscuit, and a duck and hazelnut parfait. The citrusy blobs of orange purée encircling it cut through the richness of the duck perfectly.

There are more gastronomic surprises at the nearby **Yarrow** hotel and restaurant, a vast red-brick edifice constructed in 1895 to accommodate convalescent children (yarrowhotel.co.uk). These days it's run by students from East Kent College, but you wouldn't know it from the quality of the food: no surprise, given that the guiding hand in the kitchen is Ben Williams (formerly head chef at Phil Howard's The Square). My braised chicken wing and potato gnocchetti starter, and perfectly cooked sea bass and fennel main are as good as many dishes I've eaten in London (and a steal at £20 for a three-course lunch). With food as good as this it surely can't be long until the rest of the country join those DFLs and start steering a course to this stretch of coast.

HOW TO DO IT

Clare stayed at Albion House, in Ramsgate, where doubles start from £160, b&b (albionhouseramsgate.co.uk). For more information, see visitkent.co.uk. Follow Clare on Instagram and Twitter @larderloutUK, #olive Travels.

ABOVE (FROM LEFT): WYATT & JONES, BROADSTAIRS; STARK, BIDDENDEN