# The Rose, Deal: ‘A gentle parade of impressive cooking’ – restaurant review

Starry metropolitan chef Nuno Mendes has taken his A-list cuisine to the Kent coast

[**The Rose**](https://therosedeal.com/)**, 91 High Street, Deal, Kent CT14 6ED (01304 389127). Snacks and starters £4-£12, mains £19-£25, desserts £6-£9, lunch menu, three courses £23, wines from £26**

Sitting in the middle of the table at the Rose in Deal is a single food item to which the overused and often abused term “iconic” could reasonably be applied. Pinterest is stuffed full of artfully lit pictures of it. Reputable food mags have breathlessly carried the recipe so that those who haven’t been fortunate enough to eat one can try and fail to make it at home. When it first made its entrance on to London’s sweaty-palmed food scene, the best way to guarantee the right to try one for yourself was to be a hugely talented actor who had, at the very least, been nominated for an Oscar; that, or maybe a few Grammys, or a Bafta.

This is because it’s an icing sugar-dusted crab doughnut, one of the star menu items at the [Chiltern Firehouse](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/jun/27/chiltern-firehouse-restaurant-review-marina-oloughlin) in London’s Marylebone when it opened in 2013. It was created by [Nuno Mendes](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/aug/05/nuno-mendes-top-chefs-portuguese-food-chiltern-firehouse-taberna-mercado), the Portuguese chef with great, often quirky taste, and a fine, lustrous grey-flecked beard. His crab doughnut came to represent the giddy indulgence of what was, for a while, the hottest, most thrilling A-list restaurant in town. Look at us, it bellowed. We’re so decadent we eat savoury versions of deep-fried dessert junk food. It was a place where the tables were apparently so difficult to nab even the waiting list had a waiting list.

The punchline to this overheated joke is that none of the Botoxed, primped and occasionally anally bleached A-listers who went there gave a tuppenny toss about the food. Mendes has a serious track record, from his early modernist experimentation at [Bacchus](https://www.theguardian.com/observer/foodmonthly/futureoffood/story/0,,1969448,00.html), an East End pub, through the chef’s table at [Viajante](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/05/jay-rayner-restaurant-review-viajante) to [Lisboeta](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2022/apr/15/lisboeta-london-w1-the-custard-tasted-like-bacony-trifle-restaurant-review), his recent love letter to the country of his birth. But the people he was feeding at the Chiltern Firehouse were only there to see and be obscene.

Of course, that crowd eventually moved on. There was some other new hotspot they had to frequent to reinforce their fragile sense of self. Meanwhile, the dishes created for them remain in the chef’s arsenal. Alongside the critically acclaimed Lisboeta, Mendes is also the executive chef of this pub with rooms in the quietly pretty Kent seaside town of Deal. And among the snacks here is that crab doughnut, for £6. In reality, it’s less a luxe homage to a Krispy Kreme than simply a tiny glazed bun, its golden surface dusted with a little sugar, with a sandwich filling of the white meat mixed with crème fraîche, a touch of fish sauce and lemon zest. And how is it? Oh, you know: utterly delightful.

There’s a lot about the food served in the bar area of this shabby-chic pub that delights. The fat Mendes thumbprints are all over it. As with that doughnut he loves throwing items into early courses that look like they belong on the dessert menu. At the Chiltern Firehouse there was a salad of Italian leaves with beetroot, orange and candied pecans. Here, there’s a salad of tomatoes, charred peaches, raspberries and almonds. It works because of the salty-sour chilled broth that brings it all together. This is no dessert.

His food is also achingly pretty. Behold, a piece of pale pink confited sea trout. Below are golden brown roasted charlotte potatoes. On top is a deep green dice of chives and on top of that, glistening beads of roe, the bright orange of barley twists. This stack sits, in turn, amid a lake of a classical dill butter sauce. Both a lot of thought and a lot of work has gone into this. It means that, despite the pared-down surroundings – the laminated tables, the simple school chairs – it comes at a cost. The tomato salad is £11. The trout dish is £24. My companion, who is from around these parts, says that Deal has made a reasonable accommodation with the influx of various Down From Londons who can pay these prices, and the delis and bistros that have opened in recent years. Later, she will point out a deli across the road which has a window display of crisps sold in faux paint tins. “Yes,” she says, “you might be able to buy crisps in tins, but the town is still very much itself.”

Happily, here at the Rose they do a lunch menu with two courses at £19 and three at £23. That starts with a deep, earthy sweet potato soup, the colour of rusting iron, turbo-charged with a thick spoonful of hazelnut pesto. The meat main is a generous breaded and fried pork escalope with what’s described as a raw cabbage salad – a coleslaw by any other name – under an autumnal cloudburst of toasted seeds.

That menu finishes with “Nuno’s Portuguese olive oil cake with apricot compote”, an ineffably light sponge delivered still in its baking-paper basket. The golden brown, undulating surface, like the smooth fur folds of a puppy growing into its skin, comes with its own little wake-up of a few flakes of sea salt. There’s a similar trick with a plate of chiffon cake, another extremely light sponge made with vegetable oil, served grilled with lightly seasoned and sliced strawberries, their own raspberry ripple ice-cream and a drizzle of olive oil.

The mood here on a weekday lunchtime is relaxed and laid-back as if no one has anywhere in particular to be. That may explain the service, which is delightfully warm, touchingly solicitous and completely all over the place. Nothing is hurried. Drink orders are forgotten, then have to be re-explained. A side salad doesn’t appear, until they suddenly recall it might well have been part of the order and deliver it as we finish our mains. They offer to take that off the bill and inexplicably take a few other things off besides, which then have to get added back on. For anyone worrying that I am dropping someone in it by noting this, they themselves messaged afterwards unprompted to acknowledge that it really had been a virtuoso display of slow, graceful chaos.

But the truth is I was in no particular hurry to be anywhere, so while professionally it has to be noted, personally I gave myself to this relaxed dining room and its gentle parade of impressive cooking. Once upon a time it was only for those who could be fagged to fight for a booking at the Chiltern Firehouse. That’s the thing with fashion. Eventually, when the carnival does move on, the rest of us benefit.