

# Winner by a short head

The Running Horses country inn sits in the beautiful village of Mickleham, a short distance from Box Hill, Leith Hill and the award-winning Denbies vineyard. Cook and food writer **Laura Scott** raced along to sample its fare.

**B**rakspear, The Running Horses' new owners, undertook an extensive refurbishment of the pub in late 2014 and has created an attractive gourmet destination (with accommodation) in the heart of the Surrey Hills.

Daniel Donohue leads the kitchen at The Running Horses and prefers to source local ingredients for his oft-changing menus. His rustic British flavours perfectly suit the modern British gastro pub.

We visited on a busy Saturday evening when the pub was packed full of happy customers relaxing in the bar and restaurant. When a pub situated on a country lane in the middle of the countryside on a chilly spring evening is full, it must be doing something right. Apparently, new Top Gear presenter Chris Evans is a fan and the pub holds the number eight slot in The Times '25 Best Foodie Pubs With Rooms' (November 2015).

Having lived in Surrey for nine years, I've been encouraged by the rise of improved pub food. Customers are more demanding and knowledgeable than ever before and higher standards in both quality of food and service are essential in order to become a successful venture.

To obtain a proper taste of the menu, my dining partner and I sampled six dishes. There were two stars of the meal. One was the starter of wood pigeon wellington served with hot pickled red cabbage; it was so good I could have done with more of its sweet and sour loveliness. The crisp, flaky, golden glazed pastry encased a beautifully cooked and well seasoned gamey pigeon breast.

The second was the calves liver and bacon. Calves liver is an absolute classic of a dish and one that doesn't appear often enough on menus any more. The liver was served pink, buttery soft and thinly cut to perfection. The syrupy onion gravy,



iron rich spinach and a slick of ultra smooth mash were just as they should be. My only wish was that they served a chunkier slab of salty bacon, as opposed to the more pancetta cut we had.

Portions are serious, so visit The Running Horses with appetite fully whetted. My starter of queen scallops (below, left) served in their shell was the right choice. Light morsels of sweet scallop meat with a delicate dressing. The other main course, a braised oxtail stew (far right), was hearty, unctuous and totally comforting as a dish. If deeply rich meaty dishes appeal, then this is the ideal menu.



Dessert was always going to be a challenge after such a generous meal with a menu crammed full of classic comfort puddings. After a pleasantly long break, we opted to share a hot chocolate mousse with salted caramel ice cream and a cheeseboard. The mousse (more of a chocolate fondant) defeated two of us at the end



## The Running Horses

The building's history dates back to the sixteenth century. Being on the main London Road, it became a coaching house and, in those days, the inn's clientele provided rich pickings for highwaymen.

The racing connection is from the days before the iron horse arrived, as the building was a favourite stabling for horses racing at Epsom. It was named The Running Horses in 1828 owing to a famous and rare tie at the Epsom Derby that year for which the race became known as the 'Dead Heat Derby'. The two horses involved, Colonel and Cadland, now adorn either side of the inn's sign, and its two bars are named after them.



of a bountiful meal. It did have a perfectly melting middle with a crisp outer edge, and the scoop of salted caramel ice cream worked well, although some of caramel flavour was lost against the rich chocolate taste of the mousse. Vanilla would have been more appropriate.

The cheeseboard was a little disappointing. A board of British cheese should be something to celebrate. After all, we Brits are excellent cheese makers. Apart from the local Norbury Blue, there was a disappointing selection of Bath soft, Emmental and smoked Lincolnshire poacher. The latter two were more plastic than cheese. This message was passed on, so I'm hoping this is an area of improvement, especially as the cheeses were served with excellent crackers and fruity home made chutney.



Whilst eating, we sat in one of the intimate, softly lit booths somewhat reminiscent of vintage railway carriages, with old luggage racks adorning the walls. I highly recommend booking one for privacy as well as comfort: the stylish brushed zinc tabletops and plush red banquette seating make for a welcome dining experience amongst the oak panelled bustling dining room filled with tables of contented diners.

So, for lovers of comfort food which is well executed and served in abundance at an historic pub surrounded by beautiful Surrey countryside, then trot along and pay The Running Horses a visit.

### essence INFO

The Running Horses

Website: [www.therunninghorses.co.uk](http://www.therunninghorses.co.uk)

Laura Scott: [www.howtocookgoodfood.co.uk](http://www.howtocookgoodfood.co.uk)