British Food

It is very hard to find a simple definition for ‘British’ food. Over the centuries, the British Isles have been inhabited by an amazing variety of peoples and cultures. By the time of the Norman Invasion in 1066, the country had been host to Celts, Romans, Vikings, Saxons, and Angles. Immigration in the 1800s brought French, Russian, Italian, Polish and Jewish communities, and since the end of WWII Britain has seen settlers from the West Indies, Pakistan, China, the Middle East, Nigeria, Somalia, Turkey and Cyprus. Each of these communities has brought its own food traditions and, over time, these have shaped and influenced the diets of the British nation. Today, curries, noodles, and bagels are as much a part of our nation’s food habits as roast beef and Yorkshire pudding.

Living off the land

Up until the 1900s, most British people ate only locally sourced food. Of course, traders had been bringing ingredients from overseas for centuries, goods such as spices, citrus fruits and cane sugar. However, until the twentieth century these were expensive luxuries only enjoyed by the wealthy. The majority of people ate what could be grown on the land or caught from the sea.

Britain is traditionally a beer-drinking and butter-eating nation. Dairy and pork products and breads made from locally made grain have long been a feature of many regions, as have money-saving ways of re-using leftovers (for example shepherd’s pie or rissoles) or preserving fresh produce (pickled onions or jellied eel). Recipes for offal (animal innards), such as haggis, are also very British. Almost all regions in Britain produce cheese, each one unique to the local area. Stilton, Cheddar, Caerphilly and Wensleydale are some of the most famous.

Industrial changes

The Industrial Revolution brought developments in transport, canning and refrigeration, allowing Britain to import greater quantities of foodstuffs than ever before. This lowered the cost of goods such as tea, cocoa, spices, citrus fruit, meat and other products that had previously been very expensive. All of these goods have since had a huge impact on the British diet.

A love of fish

The British have been in love with fish since the mid 1800s. So many portions of fish and chips were eaten during WWII that some say it helped us to win the war! Fish has been central to the Scottish diet and economy for centuries. Scotland is famous for its Arbroath smokies (a kind of smoked haddock) which are cured in smoke pits set up in half whiskey barrels. In Wales, the coast provides not only fish but also a special seaweed that is used to make laver bread.
The Great British cuppa

You may think of the cuppa as traditionally British, but before the 20th century only the milk was likely to have been produced in the UK. Tea leaves can only be grown in hot climates, and tea, grown in Southern Asia, was first introduced to Britain around 1650. Until Britain started producing sugar from beet, even the sugar was imported from the Caribbean. So the very British cup of tea tells a story of Britain’s connections with the rest of the world – of trading, slavery and colonialism.

Potatoes

The introduction of the potato to Britain from South America in the 1500s had a dramatic impact on British eating and farming. In Ireland the huge reliance on potatoes in the mid 1800s was such that when the Irish crop was destroyed by potato blight, one fifth of the population died. The situation was made worse by the actions of the English authorities who continued to export other Irish-grown food crops. For many Irish people, these crops would have been the only alternative source of sustenance. In post-famine Ireland, the potato remained a staple product and the Irish today remain the per capita highest consumers of potatoes in the EU.

Cultural diversity and food

What we eat, and how we eat it, is central to our sense of identity and belonging. Food and its traditions affirm who we are - and who we are not. However, curiosity, travel and migration have through centuries ensured that traditions continuously change. Our local cuisines and national identities are constantly evolving through the discovery and integration of new ingredients and flavours.

Identity crisis

Imagine an everyday diet without the South American potato, first introduced to Europe in the 1500s by Spanish soldiers. Tea was only brought to Europe from China in the 1600s. The British taste for curry can be traced back to 18th century English trading ships. Cheese making originated 5000 years ago in the Middle East. So through centuries of exchange, British food has become a culinary patchwork of cultural traditions and tastes. We bring food home from the places we visit, and we bring our food to the places we go.

Eating the world

The British attitude towards food from abroad has fundamentally changed over the last fifty years. In the 1950s and ‘60s, as disposable incomes rose, more and more people spent their money eating out and travelling abroad. While holidays overseas introduced the British to new foods and flavours, increasing numbers of restaurants selling ‘foreign’ foods opened in UK cities. Wimpey bars sold ‘genuine’ American hamburgers, Italian style coffee bars served cups of hot
espresso, and pasta restaurants helped the British to forget their fears of strange ingredients like garlic and olive oil. As hundreds of thousands of people emigrated to Britain, Indian, Chinese, Greek and Turkish restaurants increased in number and popularity. It is important to remember that while the British were happy to accept these new foods, many were unwilling to accept the communities themselves - numerous minority ethnic restaurant owners have suffered over the years from the racist comments and actions of their customers. The famous Goodness Gracious Me sketch ‘Going for an English’ cleverly highlights this tendency. There is no doubt, however, that over the last half a century the foods of numerous communities have become part of the British culinary landscape.