

## Call for HEI Partners/Academic Supervisors

# Research Theme: Beyond the Burger: USA Food Stories in the British Library's Oral History and Food Industry Literature Collections

British Library Co-Supervisors:

Dr Polly Russell (Head of Eccles Institute for the Americas & Oceania)

Mary Stewart (Lead Curator, Oral History)

Lola Gomes de Mattos (Subject Librarian, Business & IP)

### Context & Summary

The project provides a unique opportunity to assess the ways that food culture in the UK between 1945 – 2010 has been influenced, experienced and shaped by the USA food culture. The research will examine the Library's collections to trace the adoption, absorption, resistance and adaption of American food culture in the UK. Through in-depth analysis of two collection areas, the research will focus on the interplay between American food systems and the creation of British culinary culture since 1945. It will ask to what extent and in what ways did USA food culture influence food in the UK and how is this revealed and represented by the Library's collections in terms of which food sectors dominate and which are missing or have significant gaps.

The post-war period saw rapid changes in diet, food production and food consumption, as well as an expansion in associated branding, marketing and advertising. Rapid industrialisation, resulting in the mass manufacture of food products and concentrated urbanisation, two World Wars, technological innovation in refrigeration and transport, and increased travel and migration into and out of the UK dramatically transformed food culture.

More specifically, the influence of USA food production and consumption within this landscape has been significant. Supermarkets, for instance, were an US import to the UK, as were developments in intensive animal husbandry in pork and poultry, the appearance of ready meals and the spread of fast food. Innovations in production were matched by increased advertising, branding and marketing in the UK, much of it imported from the US. The influence and adoption of US food culture in the UK was facilitated by the predominance and popularity of American culture. The Library's oral history and food trade literature collections offer a rich resource for tracing, mapping and analysing some of these transformations in UK culinary culture.

This research project will explore the links between these two important collection areas, finding points of comparison and archival silence, and developing new ways for these gaps to be addressed. The oral history collections contain a record of individuals reflecting on and describing experiences of food production and consumption, providing a qualitative account of food culture in the UK. The Library's food

industry literature, drawn from market and business data and communications dating from the 1960s, offers a quantitative snapshot of UK food culture and an organisational rather than individual perspective.

By exploring and relating these two collections, the studentship will not only produce an original piece of scholarship into 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century food cultures, but will contribute to making these collections more visible through the development of resource guides, bibliographies and improved metadata. The collection histories associated with these unique but hidden food holdings will reveal new narratives about the evolution of food tastes and trends in the UK from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day.

## Research Areas

Over the last two decades, there has been a turn towards material culture in food history, with increasing work on food consumption and production in history, cultural studies and human geography, and the relationship between food, gender, class and ethnicity in anthropology and sociology. Food is an important consideration for key questions relating to climate change and public health, as well as for understanding contemporary consumer societies.

Research on the impact of US culinary culture in the UK has a tendency to imply that 'Americanisation' is a one-way street, universally deleterious and uniformly experienced. Recent work in human geography and anthropology, however, have done much to disrupt this over-simplification. Rather than assuming a 'McDonaldization' trajectory of culinary culture, analysis by Alan Warde, Peter Jackson and others has emphasised the subtleties of cultural appropriation and adaptation. Similarly, close attention to the circumstances which led to the widespread adoption of 'convenience' food in the UK has moved beyond a straightforward condemnation of the sector on the basis of sustainability and health, but instead has drawn attention to the social pressures the sector helped resolve.

The proposed project would add to this growing body of work, providing an opportunity for in-depth analysis of the multiple ways USA and UK food culture were experienced and understood by food producers since the post-war period through the connections between two unique collections. Oral history recordings with food producers from sectors including the agriculture, poultry, meat, restaurant and retail sectors will offer first-person accounts and potential case studies of food producer encounters with US food culture. The Library's food industry literature including market research, company reports and internal newsletters and trade press such as *The Grocer* provide evidence of the commercial adoption and adaptation of US culinary protocols and processes, as well as the emergence of US influenced branding, advertising and marketing models. In combination this empirical data can be used to create a cultural culinary mapping of how US food culture was adopted, appropriated and experienced in the UK. Focussing on rich archival sources to analyse the impact and experience of USA culinary culture in the UK, the research will add to literature which has demonstrated that all national cuisines are multiple, contested and transnational (see Warde etc).

The research will therefore challenge received ideas about the impact of American foodways on British culture, proposing a number of case studies where issues of influence and impact can be teased out and questioned in more detail. Rather than assume US culinary culture was wholesale adopted in the UK, the research will provide an opportunity to consider the ways the US and British experiences varied – the extent to which retailers, for example, adapted the supermarket model to suit a British context and consumers, or the ways that British entrepreneurs like Wagamama's Alan Yau adapted a USA fast-food model to deliver the UK's first fast food pan-Asian offering, or the success and failure of different mass marketing methods adopted from the US when implemented in a UK context.

In assessing two distinct archival collections – oral history recordings and food trade literature – the research will make apparent for food researchers archival holdings which are largely unknown. Research networks which might welcome more awareness of food resources include FoodGeographies, ASFS, BSA Food Group & Scoff. The research will draw attention to existing collections, while also identifying gaps and silences which the proposed research project and future research might address.

### **Benefits & Training Opportunities for the CDP Student]**

As well as mapping food collections, the research project will contribute to the Library's programme of food related activities, including the annual Food Season. This might include programming events, organising workshops and designing food resource guides for the Library's food audiences. With the benefit of expert training in oral history interviewing, recording and data collection, the PhD candidate will help bring the Library's oral history food collections up to date with the addition of 8 new life story recordings across the studentship. Determined in discussion with the Oral History supervisor and on the basis of the candidate's research findings, these will focus on two areas: filling gaps in the existing collection with interviewees who can speak to the evolution of UK food production and its interaction with US foodways and with those involved in food branding, advertising and market research, speaking directly to and about the trade literature collections the student will be assessing.

These new oral histories will be used added to the Library's permanent collection, and there will be a range of other opportunities available for the student, including creating a guide to food collections, developing workshops and seminars for food-curious audiences, helping them to share their research with broad audiences and develop transferable skills in the cultural sector. The student will also benefit from expert training in how to navigate the Library's food industry literature collections and historic collections policies, as well as where additional food materials might be found across the Library's holdings. There is also the potential to connect with other oral history and food collections nationally.

### **Application Deadline**

*Friday 29 November 2024, 12pm*

### **Application Guidance**

Further information and details of how to apply can be found in the 'Information for HEI Applicants' document made available as part of this call.

### **Contact for Queries**

British Library Research Development Office – Postgraduate inbox: [pgr@bl.uk](mailto:pgr@bl.uk)

and

Polly Russell, Head of Eccles Institute for the Americas and Oceania: [polly.russell@bl.uk](mailto:polly.russell@bl.uk)