

The Truth about British Food

For generations the British have had to endure jokes about their food. We have been accused of all manner of culinary crimes and misdemeanours, like boiling vegetables until they scream for mercy or drowning everything in unappetising gravy sauce so thick it can be cut with a knife. Some of this criticism was justified; we are the nation that brought you the fish finger and the fried chocolate bar, after all. But if your image of British cuisine is a stodgy plate of fish and chips or greasy fried breakfast then prepare for a shock; a mini revolution has taken place in the Britain's kitchens in the last twenty years, transforming not only how we cook and what we eat but how we think about food .

Before we look at these changes, first a quick history lesson. Amazing though it may seem, two hundred years ago British cuisine was considered the best in the world. We benefited from abundant and diverse local produce supplemented by exotic ingredients imported from all over the globe. The British have eaten curry since the 17th century and noodles since the 12th. In the nineteenth century however it became fashionable for the wealthy to employ French chefs and British cooking fell into a decline it has only recently begun to recover from. Local produce was neglected, cooking skills curdled as convenience overtook technique and a 'chips with everything' mentality developed.

Fast forward to the recent past and the problem could be boiled down to two things: the British couldn't cook and they couldn't shop either. However, in the last few years there has been a dramatic improvement in both these areas. A series of high profile, charismatic 'super chefs' have emerged establishing their own highly regarded and fashionable restaurants (Britain has six of the top 50 restaurants in the world according to Restaurant magazine including the number 2 'The Fat Duck' <http://www.fatduck.co.uk/>). Away from their places of business the super chefs have inspired the British public by writing best-selling recipe books and producing a rich diet of cooking programmes to which the British public have become addicted. Every weekday the BBC transmits 'Ready, Steady, Cook!' a cooking competition featuring professionals teamed with amateurs which has attracted a cult following.

This programme is notable for three things that tell us a lot about how attitudes to cooking have changed in Britain. Firstly the teaming of members of the public with professionals shows how confident and ambitious ordinary people have become in their cooking ability (it is estimated that the average British kitchen now contains over 1,000 recipes). Secondly, the competition is judged by the audience based solely on the appearance of the finished dishes revealing a new awareness and sensitivity to the importance of presentation. And finally, the contestants in this programme are given a small budget yet still manage to assemble unusual and exotic ingredients which shows how discerning the British public have become and how readily available and affordable the best produce from around the world now is.

Indeed British food shoppers are now choosing their groceries with more care than ever. Most supermarkets now clearly label their food with its point of origin and there has been a surge of interest in organic food and a revival in the popularity of locally-grown produce sold through the booming farmer's markets. Good examples of this are the award winning 'Stinking Bishop' cheddar and Scotland's 'Champagne Milk' the purest (and highest calorie) milk available – although over-indulgence in these rich delicacies could lead to ,not only, your perceptions of British food being broadened but your waistline.

This renaissance has led to a debate as to just what is British food. While all the old favourites remain – fish and chips, pies, hotpots etc the number one dish around the UK is curry. British curry has emerged as a distinctively British variant on the Indian original and has become an established part of British life. The kind of curry you can buy in the UK is unobtainable elsewhere and usually of a high quality and reasonably priced. Curry hot spots in England include London's Brick Lane, Manchester's Curry Mile as well as Bradford and Glasgow.

If Britain's attitude to food and cooking skills has changed so has our way of describing food. We can describe our degrees of hunger in a number of ways from slight 'I'm a little peckish' to extreme 'I'm absolutely starving' or 'ravenous' and the food itself can be 'nice', 'lovely', 'delicious', 'superb', 'mouth-watering', 'yummy' or 'Moorish' a new word often used with snacks that you can't stop eating. Hopefully you will have occasion to employ some of these words as you 'tuck in' to some good British 'grub'. Bon appetite!