



D'YOU WANT FRIES WITH THAT?

IT'S A SOURCE OF COMFORT AND TURNS EVEN THE MOST MUNDANE OF SATURDAY NIGHTS INTO SOMETHING OF A CULINARY ADVENTURE. WE PAY TRIBUTE TO THE HUMBLE TAKEAWAY

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After a long working week, is there any sound more welcome than the putter of a moped and the soft knock of a gloved hand on the door? As a richly frescoed fast-food stall recently excavated in Pompeii shows, takeaways have been around for a long time. For many of us, they've become something of a lifeline in recent months. Whether wrapped in greaseproof paper or ladled neatly into tubs, a takeaway dinner is both a convenience and a comfort – one of the few joys of having to stay at home. We trace the story of our lazy-night treats through the rivers, trade winds and migration routes that thread between us all – a hungry nation on the go.

DOWN BY THE RIVERSIDE

Early 'takeaways' were born of necessity. In Roman times, for example, poorer city dwellers were unlikely to have cooking facilities at home, heading instead to taverns and snack bars for the likes of cheap and plentiful oysters, or an ancient take on kebabs. Fast-forward to medieval times, and the banks of the Thames told a similar street food tale, with rows of stalls selling hot crusty pies and baked apples to hungry travellers and locals with no kitchens of their own.

STEAM AND HOT OIL

In Stuart and Georgian Britain, cities continued to grow bigger and busier, dense with hungry residents. Street hawkers called out their wares, their heavy baskets perched above necks of steel. Sturdy cakes, muffins and crumpets were crowd-pleasers, as were more indulgent treats: cherries on sticks, say, or pickled salmon. The trade winds and expanding colonies meant a bounty of new spices and exciting tastes were being brought to our shores. The first Indian restaurant, the Hindoostane Coffee House, opened in London in 1810, though it was so far ahead of its time it closed a year later. The Victorian era's great steamships helped to popularise previously out-of-reach foods: the once rare pineapple could now be imported en masse from sunnier climes and sold by the slice as a takeaway treat. Cheap eats from market stalls and street barrows were abundant in Dickensian times, feeding ravenous factory workers used to long hours of back-breaking labour. Ham sandwiches went for a penny



a piece, or one could wolf down gut-lining sheep trotters, boiled potatoes and pickled whelks after a night spent drinking at the taproom.

In Italy, meanwhile, freshly baked pizzas were stacked in multi-layered metallic containers and sold by street vendors; it wasn't until the invention of the corrugated cardboard box in the 1960s that pizza deliveries could finally take off without the affliction of a soggy bottom caused by steam. Another import made an indelible mark on Britain's culinary landscape: fish – abundant thanks to the development of trawlers – fried to crispy, golden perfection by Jewish »

Do you know the muffin man (above)? Or, indeed, 'The Oyster King' (left)? Profferers of early 'takeaways', these trades began out of necessity catering to people lacking kitchens

"A bounty of new spices and exciting tastes were being brought to our shores"

Portable snacks around the globe

Tamales (Mexico)

Mesoamerica's answer to 'waste not, want not', these corn-dough parcels wrapped and steamed in corn husks are as filling as they are comforting. Don't forget a drizzle of zesty *salsa verde*.

Dabeli (Gujarat)

An ode to carb-on-carb action, this spiced potato snack is stuffed in a burger bun, served with punchy tamarind and chilli chutneys and topped with pomegranate and roasted peanuts.

Hoeori Gamja (Korea)

These poetically named 'tornado potatoes' are a towering spiral of thinly-sliced, deep-fried potatoes on a stick. Some variations come with a hot sausage centre – not for the faint-hearted.

Num Ansom (Cambodia)

Peel away the banana-leaf exterior for a bite of sticky rice, coconut milk and savoury pork or sweet banana. For a crusty, moreish caramelised finish, roast on a hot charcoal grill by the roadside.

Bunny Chow (South Africa)

Testing the very limits of the words 'snack' and 'portable', this hearty dish consists of a hollowed-out loaf of white bread filled with a rich, generous curry. They're usually eaten with your fingers, so grab a napkin.



immigrants from Holland. By the 1930s, more than 35,000 fish and chip shops could be found up and down the country. So synonymous with keeping the masses well fed were the 'good companions', as Winston Churchill called them, that they were never rationed during the war.

NOODLES AND RICE

But what of our beloved chow meins and tikka masalas? Although Chinese restaurants had opened in London by the turn of the 20th century, it wasn't until the return of servicemen from Asia after the Second World War that they found an appreciative British clientele. Waves of immigration from Hong Kong in the 50s and 60s helped Chinese food gain a foothold on these shores. Meanwhile, the end of spice rationing and fresh arrivals from the Indian subcontinent saw a boom in Indian restaurants. Tweaked to suit British tastes, these cuisines developed a popular local identity of their own. Chicken tikka masala allegedly started out as an on-the-fly concoction

of cream, spices and tomato soup to warm up a wet Glaswegian night. British Chinese menus, packed with western riffs on Cantonese classics, livened up TV dinners and nights out alike.

Spiced patties and jerk chicken may not have seeped quite so readily into mainstream food culture, but Caribbean takeaways served plenty of community spirit alongside heaped containers of rice and peas. By the 1980s, Britain still had a long way to go to discover the breadth and subtleties of world cuisine – but an appetite had been whetted with the crunch of a spring roll and the fiery zing of a vindaloo.

A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Do you ever find yourself humming the lyrics to Snoop Dogg's *Just Eat* anthem? Recalcitrant phone callers everywhere breathed a sigh of relief when the internet made ordering a takeaway seemingly effortless. We now have more choice than ever, thanks to the ever-growing likes of Deliveroo and UberEats. But the anonymity of many modern takeaways hides a generational shift. Takeaways have become big business: we now live (and eat) in the age of mini chains, dark kitchens and delivery-only remote premises. Family businesses are closing down as

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It's not just tastes that have changed, it's the packaging too: from foil trays to the Chinese 'oyster pail' container and, of course, the much-loved newspaper wrapped package of fish and chips

their original owners retire and their children opt for the white-collar jobs their parents have worked hard to open the doors to. A new ordering culture is also emerging from the chaos of the recent pandemic. Restaurants and independents can now reach the whole country: whether in Devon or Dundee, one could easily bookend a weekend with Dishoom's famous bacon naan roll kit and a mezcal-laced cocktail from The Manhattans Project. As plastic tubs stack higher in kitchen cupboards across the nation, can this proliferation last? Some efforts are being made towards more socially responsible and sustainable takeaway models (take London's DabbaDrop's clever reusable containers, for instance), but there's still a long way to go. Meanwhile, our appetite for globetrotting dining, all done from inside our homes, grows ever more insatiable. **S**



THE FAST AND THE FILLING

Somewhere between a casual café, a school canteen and a takeaway, fast-food outlets hold a nostalgic place in our hearts, as anyone who's ordered a 2am Whopper or clutched a Happy Meal between their ketchup-stained fingers will attest. The 1974 arrival of McDonald's put an end to the 20-year reign of British native Wimpy (above); the American giant now has some 1,300 branches in the UK. But that's nothing compared to the meteoric rise of fried chicken. Landed on these shores in 1965, KFC has spawned countless competitors, from the prosaic Tasty Chicken to the upmarket Mother Clucker, with 8,000 chicken shops in London alone. The fight for our on-the-run, salt-addled but increasingly sophisticated taste buds continues, though a latest foray – Maccy D's Katsu Curry Chicken McNuggets – has left some critics cold.