Guinness and Food: Ingredients in an Unlikely Gastronomic Revolution

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Food and wine are a gastronomic coupling that trips off the tongue with ease, capable of conjuring up sensory memories of gatherings with loved ones, or marking the various landmark events that occur in the course of a lifetime. Wine complements its food partner without dominating, and can sharpen the appetite as opposed to suppressing it. Contrast this with food and beer, or more specifically food and Guinness. The associations are very different, and for some, unimaginable. Why should this be so? Guinness enjoys a long-standing relationship with gastronomy, and yet, due to the heavy, appetite-sapping nature of the product, it is often considered an unlikely, and even undesirable, combination. For many generations of drinkers, the ‘Guinness is good for you’ mantel articulated its nutritional powers, a claim that still resonates today, despite its consignment to history due to a much stricter legislative environment. The tagline positioned Guinness in a unique space, a drink that quenches thirst, while giving the drinker nutrients, and consequently leaving them feeling sated. However, as far back as the nineteenth century, tales of people enjoying food accompanied by Guinness have been regaled by authors, and reported by journalists. Since the end of the 1920s, Guinness has actively promoted the pairing of food and Guinness through adverts, publicity, and the sponsorship of various food events, most famously oyster festivals. More recently, celebrity chefs and high profile eating establishments have played their part in promoting Guinness, with the black stuff taking a leading role in many recipes. This paper explores how Guinness’s early promotional activities helped make the revolutionary pairing of food and Guinness both acceptable and desirable.

Guinness and oysters – the start of a revolution

As far back as 21st November 1837, Benjamin Disraeli, future Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, wrote to his sister Sarah, telling her how he had celebrated the opening of Queen Victoria’s first Parliament:

There was a division on the Address in Queen Victoria’s first Parliament, 509 to 20. I then left the House at ten o’clock, none of us having dined……I supped at the Carlton, with a large party, off oysters and Guinness, and got to bed at half-past twelve o’clock. Thus ended the most remarkable day hitherto of my life. (Yenne 2007, p.33)

High praise indeed from a future leader, who saw fit to name check Guinness, as opposed to a generic beer or stout. Furthermore, Disraeli’s specific reference to Guinness is significant for a couple of reasons. Firstly, he positioned it alongside events that contributed to, in his words: ‘the most remarkable day hitherto of my life.’ Such positive affirmation for a brand, and its ability to make people happy cannot be underestimated when it comes to building loyalty. In a contemporary context, such a testimonial might have been shared with a wider circle through
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Walrus and the Carpenter as they walked down the strand, closely followed by a group of oysters. There was an air of innocence about the edible molluscs, but it was not long before their fate became clear. In the final verse of the ad’s copy, the reader learns that:

The Walrus and the Carpenter
Sat down at once to sup,
The Oysters, too, went smoothly down,
And Guinness crowned the cup –
And not a word was spoken more
’Til all was finished up!

Seizing upon the promotion of oysters as an accompaniment for Guinness was a timely move. According to Mennell (1996), the 1920s in Great Britain was a period of significant social change, partly due to the departure of servants from many homes. Consequently, many women were left to cope without cooks, and they turned to women’s magazines and recipe books for help. Simple recipes became popular and social engagements centred on suppers as opposed to grand dinners. He cites one such dish, Poisson en Coquilles as typical at that time – it comprised of cold fish with pickle and mayonnaise served in a scallop shell.

In February 1931, a press ad in Tatler depicted a clock striking eight o’clock, as five cartoon-style oysters advertising or public relations, thus having a positive effect on the Guinness brand. One hundred years after the letter was sent, this is exactly what Guinness did when they published an ad in Time magazine (Fig. 1). (See notes.)

Secondly, his statement singled out a gastronomic pairing between Guinness and oysters that would stand the test of time. References to Guinness and oysters were made in some of the earliest examples of its advertising in the United Kingdom. The campaigns were spearheaded by the advertising agency SH Benson, who employed the services of the illustrator J. Gilroy. His iconic work became synonymous with many of the beautifully executed illustrations that featured in Guinness’s ads. When Guinness started advertising in the UK in 1929, it placed an advert in The Sketch, a weekly newspaper aimed at a readership made up of aristocrats and members of British high society (see Fig. 2). The copy in the ad was unequivocal in its belief that Guinness and oysters ‘are inseparable.’ It featured the testimony of unidentified connoisseurs to back up its claim, and stated proudly that: ‘Epicures say that there is nothing like Guinness to bring out the subtle charm of oysters.’ Such language is more commonly associated with the way in which a sommelier might advise customers as to which wine to select when eating a particular food.

That same year, an ad inspired by Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking Glass was published, again in The Sketch (Fig. 3). The copy recounted a tale of Carroll’s
ads in *The Tatler* in 1932 and 1936 reassured readers that ‘Guinness and Oysters are good for you.’ This was significant because it gave oysters access to Guinness’s treasured tagline, ‘Guinness is good for you.’ In sharing a tagline in this way, a brand must be confident that it will not be undermined in any way. A 1933 ad in *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic* and *Illustrated London News* signed off with: ‘Guinness is good for oysters - good for you.’ This was a play on the ‘Guinness is good for you’ line while at the same time communicating the gastronomic rationale for combining Guinness and oysters.

In order to reinforce this compelling health message with key influencers, a series known as *The Doctor’s Books* gesticulated towards it (Fig. 4). The accompanying copy stated dramatically: ‘Guinness Time cried the oysters’. Their tears and obvious distress served to emphasise their strong relationship with Guinness that was being cultivated through advertising at that time.

By reiterating the message on a regular basis, in all likelihood it was intended that aficionados and seafood enthusiasts would not contemplate dining on oysters without Guinness. This sentiment was articulated in an ad in *The Bystander* in February 1931. Alongside imagery depicting a glass of Guinness and four oyster shells, the copy proposed that: ‘Guinness brings the oysters out of their shells.’ In 1936, *Time Magazine* carried an ad headlined ‘Inseparables.’ It set out to portray oysters and Guinness as a commonplace food combination, as predictable and popular as ‘bacon and eggs, waffles and syrup, strawberries and cream, and corned beef and cabbage.’ The copy in the ad was uncompromising when it asserted that: ‘As every traveller knows, Guinness-and-oysters is more than a custom in the world’s best restaurants – it’s a rule.’ Just as white wine goes with white fish, the ad reinforced the compatibility between Guinness and oysters when it put forward a compelling rationale: ‘One is the natural complement of the other – each brings out the other’s flavour – together they conspire to whet the appetite and thus aid digestion’ (Fig. 5).

The health benefits of consuming both Guinness and oysters are a common theme in many UK press ads. Press in *Time* in 1936 went so far as to say: ‘Guinness is good for you – it’s a rule.’ Just as white wine goes with white fish, Guinness and oysters were promoted as a natural match. The copy in the ad put forward a compelling rationale: ‘One is the natural complement of the other – each brings out the other’s flavour – together they conspire to whet the appetite and thus aid digestion’ (Fig. 5).
first ‘celebrity chefs,’ Mrs. Beeton. Successful brands are built on trust, and the public trusted Mrs. Beeton because her books were very practical and accessible, offering advice on a wide variety of topics including labour-saving techniques in the home, laundry work, recipes, cooking for invalids, and the art of cooking economically. Using the Beeton brand as a theme for the 1956 Doctor’s Book was clever because her no-nonsense approach was something that doctors and their spouses could relate to. In many ways, the Doctor’s Books series was ahead of its time. They targeted a very influential and revered target audience, and placed the Guinness brand at the heart of some very entertaining material. They were beautifully illustrated and contained poems that had the potential to appeal to an audience far wider than the doctors receiving the gifts. What better way to quell a revolution, and render its message mainstream?

In 1938, a print ad in Time Magazine played on feelings of social inadequacy that can be stirred in target audiences was produced. According to the Guinness Archive, these books were the brainchild of Bensons, inspired by the many testimonials that they had sought, and received from doctors so as to give credibility to the ‘Guinness is good for you’ proposition. The aim was to produce a branded gift for doctors from Guinness in order to strengthen the relationship between the two parties. The books were sent to doctors each Christmas between 1933 and 1939, and again from 1950 to 1966. As described by the Guinness Archive fact sheet: ‘the themed, lavishly illustrated books notable for their whimsical charm and overt literary parody, contained many lateral – and often ingenious – references to Guinness, both visual and verbal.’

References to food can be found throughout many of the books, and in 1956 the theme centred on one of Britain’s

![Fig. 6.](image-url)

![Fig. 7.](image-url)
For lunch isn’t lunch without it,  
So hurry up about it,  
It’s nice to drink and it’s nice to think that a 
Guinness is good for you.

The couple was freeze-framed and their picture appeared  
behind a chef standing at a work surface preparing food  
(Fig. 8). Accompanied by the music of  
*Daisy Bell*, he 
advised the following:  
Albert was right you know. There’s nothing like a 
Guinness when you’re thirsty. And food goes with 
Guinness….well like Albert goes with Daisy. Even 
the simplest of snacks is twice as tempting with a 
good, creamy Guinness. And it’s the appetising taste 
of Guinness that makes it go so well with food.

The actor portraying Albert concluded the ad by singing:  
‘Yes, it’s nice to drink and it’s nice to think that a 
Guinness is good for you.’ His lyrics in the first part of the ad would be 
deemed chauvinistic in a twenty-first century setting. Albert 
imparted orders to Daisy, while she smiled happily and 
complied, seemingly unperturbed by her subservient role.

The ad was unambiguous in its intent, and that was to 
forge a link between food and Guinness. Copy like ‘Lunch 
isn’t lunch without it (Guinness),’ ‘And food goes with 
Guinness,’ ‘the simplest of snacks is twice as tempting with a 
good, creamy Guinness.’ The testimonial 
from the chef was symbolic because of his expert status. Even 
though Guinness and food together might have seemed 
unlikely, the seal of approval from a chef gave the claims 
credibility. Borrowing from this idea, in 1965 and 1966, a 
number of press ads in Ireland featured the illustration of a 
chef with the accompanying headline: ‘A good chef will tell 
you Guinness goes so well with food’ (Fig. 9).

Another ad that paired food and Guinness in the 
mid-fifties featured an animated kangaroo, taken from the 
est of animals created by the illustrator J. Gilroy for print 
ads. The ad opened with a male voiceover stating ‘A 
Guinness Guide to Food, conducted by the Guinness
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Kangaroo. From then on, he engaged with the kangaroo’s unfathomable utterings, and translated for the audience. ‘Is that kangaroo talk for: Guinness goes well with any kind of food? Well show us some.’ The kangaroo made his way to a plate of food on a table and the voiceover said enthusiastically: ‘Mmm... roast Surrey fowl with crisp roast potatoes and tender garden peas.’ Glasses of Guinness appeared amidst the food, evoking a response: ‘And Guinness of course completes the picture.’ The kangaroo moved on to more food and was reassured by the voiceover: ‘All right, we’re with you. Quite right. We wouldn’t want to miss a spread like this when there’s G.... Hey, where is the Guinness?’ The camera panned over plates of vol au vents, crab claws and other appetising nibbles. ‘Ah, that’s better,’ said the voiceover in a relieved tone as the kangaroo produced three glasses of Guinness. ‘Now where is she?’ said the voiceover, referring to the kangaroo. ‘One jump ahead as usual,’ as she was next seen sitting beside a salad comprising meat, eggs, lettuce, beetroot, potato salad, and a joint of beef. A bowl of salad and condiments were visible too. ‘And who wouldn’t be when there’s cold roast beef on the menu and a creamy Guinness to go with it?’ The voiceover concluded the ad with an emphatic statement when he said: ‘Yes, Guinness goes so well with food.’

The toucan, another Guinness character created by Gilroy, featured in an ad that followed the same format as the kangaroo ad. Different foods were portrayed and the voiceover really pushed the idea of food and Guinness being ideal partners. The ad was liberally punctuated with copy like: ‘Guinness goes naturally with good food.’ ‘And what else does Guinness go with? Ah yes, a party spread like this,’ (a close-up shot of cocktail sausages, crisps, boiled eggs, and ham rolls); and ‘Yes, mealt ime is Guinness time. It’s wonderfully right with anything from bread and cheese to a mixed grill. As our friend (the toucan) here puts it, Guinness goes so well with food’ (Fig. 10).

The visual and aural signs in this particular series of cinema ads were very significant in the context of the mid-1950s. In 1940, the British government was forced to impose years of food rationing on its population. It remained in place for some years after the Second World War had ended, and even then, was only lifted on a phased basis. A news report from the BBC in July 1954 announced the end of rationing with the headline: ‘Housewives celebrate end of rationing.’ The headline provides an interesting perspective on society in the 1950s, and is quite categorical in its view that the end of rationing was of most relevance to women. Throughout the years of frugal supplies, it was the women of Britain who were forced to eke out their supplies in order to put together family meals. Avoiding the tedium of repetition must have been challenging, so the use of the word ‘celebrate’ in the headline was no exaggeration. The report goes on to chronicle the removal of the restrictions, starting with flour in July 1948, canned and dried fruit, chocolate, biscuits, treacle, syrup, jellies and mincemeat in May 1950, sugar in 1953, butter in May 1954, and finally, meat and bacon in July of that year.

Mennell (1996) surveyed two women’s magazines, Good Housekeeping and Woman’s Own, just as rationing came to an end. He found that the narrative was about variation, cookery as a hobby, and as a method of showcasing social status to peers. Just as rationing was ending in Britain, a consumer revolution was occurring. According to Winterman (2012), the wider availability of labour-saving white goods in the home made it possible for housewives to devote more time to home baking, and the preparation of...
family dinners. These tasks were made easier with the arrival of specialist appliances, thus allowing women to create dishes more quickly and efficiently. The cinema ads described above depicted the repertoire of a 1950s housewife, made possible with the acquisition of new devices, and the availability of a wide range of ingredients again.

Symbolically, both cinema ads celebrated the end of more than a decade of deprivation by featuring many of the products that had been rationed. Of particular relevance was the array of meats in both ads (Fig. 11): roast leg of lamb, cocktail and chipolata sausages, fresh ham, joint of beef, and roast Surrey fowl. The ingredients required for many of the featured foods included flour and butter, and here they were, resplendent in a feast-like setting, all topped off with creamy glasses of Guinness. Having endured years of rationing, images such as those presented in the ads, must have been uplifting, and suddenly attainable.

In 1956, still only two years after the complete cessation of rationing, Guinness ran a TV ad in the UK called Guinness with food. It featured a barman standing behind the food counter in his bar as he spoke to the camera:

Though I say it myself, we do serve good food here. My customers like something good to go with it – a glass of Guinness. We serve a tremendous lot of it here, specially with snacks. There’s something about the taste of Guinness that goes just right with food. There - isn’t that a picture [as the camera zoomed in on the tray of food]. (Fig. 12) Well, I’ll be taking it over to the lady and gent. I reckon they know what’s good for them. And if you know what’s good for you, you’ll have a Guinness.

The ad concluded with a voiceover agreeing with the barman that said: ‘Yes, Guinness goes so well with food.’ Again, the testimonial advertising style was deployed, only this time the barman and not the chef delivered the message. The imagery was celebratory as the counter from which the barman served the meals was laden with food, and far removed from the fare synonymous with ration-blighted Britain (Fig. 13).

The idea of showing Guinness amongst a plentiful supply of food continued in 1960s Britain, as seen in a 1961 press ad, Guinness Guide to Country Dishes. A glass of Guinness with the oft-used campaign tagline, ‘Guinness goes so well with food’, was placed among some of the nation’s favourite dishes, including pork pies, Cornish pasties, love in disguise (veal), and gammon and spinach hotpot consisting of mutton, kidneys, mushrooms and oysters (Fig. 14).

A post-War, post-ration revolution was taking place and Guinness’s ads ensured that the popular drink was an integral part of the gastronomic upheaval.

From revolution to mainstream

Despite efforts to normalise the consumption of Guinness when dining on a full repertoire of foods, it is the oyster that emerged as the drink’s most resilient ally. One only has to scan the articles written by travel writers and food critics to see that Guinness and oysters emerge as firm favourites, and are frequently mentioned alongside each other. Given the number of ads promoting this combination from 1929 onwards, it should come as no surprise, and is testament to the copywriters and art directors who created some of Guinness’s most memorable
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White who enthuses: ‘I used to sit at my old place, Wheeler’s of St James, and have half a pint of Guinness, in a silver goblet from over the road in the Red Lion, with half a dozen oysters. I like the romance of it.’ (Sibley, 2008). His words go beyond taste and functionality, and elevate his love of Guinness and oysters to an emotional, ritualistic level that stirs up feelings of romance in him. Such feelings are often experienced when reflecting on the outcome of a revolution. The false starts are forgotten, but the winner takes its place in both folklore and the everyday. Guinness and oysters emerged as clear victors in a food revolution that was valiantly fought by Guinness. It deployed its artillery of adverts, festivals, testimonials, celebrity chefs, and journalists, but most importantly, the experience lived up to the promises for generations of gourmands. Hence, while it is clear that the oyster arose victorious from Guinness’s food revolution, the drink played its part in helping the British public emerge from the austerity of rationing. Its 1950s ads celebrated food, and in particular the return of the nation’s favourites, dishes that were conspicuous by their absence until 1954.

Food and drink creates good and bad memories. In order to make new ones, it takes effort, something that Guinness was prepared to exert in its ads in Britain from 1929 until the breakout of the Second World War, and again in the 1950s and 1960s.

Notes

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Works cited


Fig. 15.