Pie and Mash: A Victorian Anachronism in Modern Cosmopolitan Britain?

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Walking down Bermondsey Street from London Bridge Station towards Tower Bridge Road is like walking back through time, as a gentrified neighbourhood, with boutique male grooming salons, a fashion museum and epicurean delis, makes way to a more traditional high street and to M Manze’s Eel and Pie House. Opened in 1902, M Manze is one of London’s oldest surviving traditional pie and mash shops. Sitting in its narrow booths with marble top tables, eating pie and mash for less than a fiver, surrounded by traditional Victorian green and white tiles, and a cacophony of lively conversations, feels like being transported to another time (see Figure 1).

Pie and mash, served with parsley sauce (known as liquor), historically alongside jellied or stewed eels, is known as the ‘Londoners’ meal’ and has been closely associated with East London (see Figure 2). For well over a century pie and mash shops were among the most popular food establishments in and around London while also serving as important communal spaces, particularly in working class neighbourhoods (see, for example: Jacobs, 2015; and McGrath, 2018). This tradition, however, is in decline and many historic pie and mash shops, some well over a century old, have closed down. From a height of over a hundred and fifty after the Second World War, only around two dozen remain in London.

Eighteen months ago I was commissioned to write a short piece for the Conversation on the closure of the 128 year-old A J Goddard pie and mash shop in Deptford East London (Ranta, 2018). The last time I had eaten pie and mash, before engaging in this research, was probably twenty years ago. As someone who did not grow up with pie and mash, I always considered the shops simply as part of the wide range of offerings one could get on the high street. Writing this short article, about the closure of this particular pie and mash shop, made me aware of the long history and tradition of pie and mash, it also raised a number of questions. The most interesting of which is how should we interpret and understand the apparent decline of traditional pie and mash shops. For me this question raises a number of issues many of which are pertinent to this symposium on food and disruption.

Focusing on the relationship between food and identity, I contextualise and examine the apparent decline of traditional pie and mash shops. My focus on food and identity is based on a number of theoretical underpinnings. Food is not only essential to life, it is also part of our everyday lives (eating, cooking, buying, eating out, talking about it, etc.) and has a direct relationship to who we are. It is an anthropological truism that how we eat, what we eat and what we choose not to eat, communicates who we are to ourselves and to others (Mintz S, 1986). The above
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The British culinary relationship with eels is an interesting one. For hundreds of years eels were a prominent feature of British food culture; the eel trade was mentioned in the Doomsday book of 1066 and has been traced back to Anglo-Saxon times. Eels were plentiful and provided a highly nutritious source of protein, they were ‘cheaper than meat’, easy to catch and ‘English rivers held lots of them’ (Schweid, 2002). One river in particular, the Thames, which cuts through London, was closely associated with the eel trade until the late nineteenth century (Fort, 2002).

Nevertheless, and despite being consumed in vast quantities for almost two millennia, the precise understanding of where eels came from and their reproduction cycle only became somewhat clear at the beginning of the twentieth century. By that time, as a result of the disruption caused by overfishing and increased water pollution, the eel population in British waters declined by over 90% (Schweid, 2002). Partly as a result of this, eels were replaced by meat, particularly beef, as the preferred pie filling. The transition to meat reflected changing diets and preferences, as eels became associated with poverty and pollution; In London, due to water pollution, the river Thames could no longer sustain significant eel populations (Freedman, 2017). The rejection of eels is still present in modern British food culture; some pie and mash shops have even gone as far as removing this iconic part of their history from their menus (Freedman, 2017). To illustrate this point, in recent surveys on food preference, jellied eels have come top of dishes most people in the UK have not tried and do not want to try (Smith, 2019).

After replacing eels with meat in the late nineteenth century, the shops menus by and large stayed the same for over a century. What did these shops sell? They mostly sold affordable minced beef pies, which were made from scratch at the premises. The pies were served alongside plain mash with liquor and, for those who wanted it, a side of either stewed or jellied eels, which were initially prepared on site. The translucent green liquor was originally the eel poaching liquid with the addition of flour to thicken it and parsley and salt, but nowadays most shops do not poach, or even prepare the eels themselves and the liquor sauce no longer has the same flavoursome taste; in many shops the poaching liquid has been replaced with water.

After World War One, and particularly after World War Two, pie and mash shops, which were predominantly family-owned, and employed people from the local community, became very popular. Alongside fish and chip shops, cafes, and local pubs, they dominated the social space of most London neighbourhoods, particularly those in the East of the city, and became closely associated with East London and English white working class culture and identity (Jacobs, 2015; and McGrath, 2018).
The decline of pie and mash

If traditional pie and mash shops were so popular, and central to many communities, why have they been closing down? The answer to this question is multifaceted and the reasons for closures are often specific to particular shops. Nevertheless, there are a number of factors that seem to have played a role. These very much support Bell and Valentine’s (1997) argument that food disruption and changes in food culture mirror social, economic and political processes. They also point towards the centrality of food as a marker of individual and group identity (Ichijo and Ranta, 2016; and Mintz S, 1986).

First, in the past two decades traditional pie and mash shops have suffered, along with many other businesses, and particularly food establishments, from a general slump in high street trade. Working on very low margins, the decline in trade volume, blamed among other factors on online shopping, increased competition, and increases in rents and business rates, have negatively affected most shops (see, for example the British government’s report on the High Street Performance, 2011; and analysis carried out by the Guardian newspaper: Holder, 2019). Many of the shop owners interviewed highlighted in particular the decline in trade volume and rising rents and business rates, as some of the major issues they faced, particularly in London.

Second, during and after the Second World War, East London experienced a number of dramatic and disruptive events that have resulted in changes to its demographic composition. On the one hand, white working class started leaving London to the suburbs and coastal towns of Kent and Essex as part of a process of upward, but also downward mobility. Kent and Essex are among the few areas in which new pie and mash shops have opened since the Second World War. This was the result of slum clearings and estate building by the British government in the aftermath of the war; the ‘deindustrialization of East London’; the closure of the docks; increased immigration into the area; and ‘shortages of affordable housing’ (Watt et al., 2014, p.126).

On the other hand, East London also experienced increased inward migration. This is not surprising, after all the area has always been one of the main migration gateways into the UK. After the Second World War, East London experienced a number of migration waves, primarily from the West Indies and Indian subcontinent (Marriot, 2011). The newcomers brought with them their own extensive food cultures, from jerk chicken to curries, normally very small and do not contain any healthy value ethical or sustainable food. The shops menus are to offer vegans; there is also little to offer customers who are into, in the words of one former shop owner, ‘food fads’ (Ranta, 2018).

Food fads are another reason for the shops’ decline. Pie and mash shops have suffered from broader changes in attitudes towards diets and food. Most traditional shops provide little choice to costumers. Most shops have only one vegetarian option, a cheese and onion pie, and nothing to offer vegans; there is also little to offer customers who value ethical or sustainable food. The shops menus are normally very small and do not contain any healthy options, it is basically ‘carbs with carbs’. Interestingly enough the owner of A J Goddard blamed vegetarians, alongside gentrification and rising business rates and rents for the closure of his shop (Ranta, 2018).

Future of Pie and Mash

Despite what I have written above, the story about the decline of pie and mash is more nuanced. While traditional pie and mash shops are indeed in decline, pie eating, and pie and mash as an iconic English dish, is going through a renaissance. There is also a lot more recognition nationally and internationally to pies and pie-making in the UK; further signifying how food is increasingly seen as national (Ranta, 2015; Ichijo and Ranta, 2016). For example, Cornish pasty, one of the better known pie varieties, and Cornish pasty shops can be found almost everywhere in the UK. Cornish pasty has also, since 2011, received official protection from the EU under the Protected Geographic Indication (PGI) scheme; the mutual recognition of the scheme will form part of the post-Brexit negotiations between the UK and the EU (Ranta, 2019). Pie and mash as an iconic dish is also everywhere, from pubs to bistros to fish and chips shops an Marks &
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Goddard’s in Greenwich, which has been around for over seventy years, has added ten pies, including a vegan soy-based one (see Figure 4). Shops have also decided to combine a number of different British culinary traditions associated with pie eating. In the North of England the traditional way of eating pies is with mushy peas and gravy. You will not find any gravy in shops such as M Manze. Goddard’s serves its pies with either mash or mushy peas, alongside either liquor or gravy, some shops have also added chips and baked beans as an offering.

The fusing together of different regional food cultures broadens what is considered national food (Ichijo and Ranta, 2016). In many ways this follows other case studies of how national food cultures have evolved through subsuming regional foods (Appadurai, 1988). Some shops have also added other iconic British dishes, such as fish and chips or bangers and mash, to the menu. Many of these surviving shops also offer a range of what are considered traditional British puddings, from sticky toffee pudding to crumbles. What these actions have done is further cement the traditional and national aspect of pie and mash.

Lastly, while traditional pie and mash shops have struggled, over the past decade several new ‘trendy’ and up market pie restaurant chains, such as Piecaramba, Piebury, and Pieminister, have opened across the country. These new restaurants still sell pie and mash, though none offer eels, but in addition are broadening and redefining the concept of pie eating and traditional and national food.

On the one hand, they offer a wider choice of pies, mash and side dishes. Piecaramba for example offers 27 different pies, four of which are vegetarian and three vegan, and four types of mash. The new restaurants also demonstrate greater awareness of a wide range of food issues that are important to consumers, from ethically and sustainably sourced products to provision of gluten free pies and allergy charts (see Figure 5).

On the other hand, the new restaurants are reinterpreting, broadening and redefining traditional and national food. They are reinterpreting traditional dishes, for example, Piebury’s scotch pie with haggis, neeps and tatties, a take on haggis, the Scottish national dish. They are broadening the concept of traditional...
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and national food by adding ingredients, which are not usually seen as or used in British and English food, such as maple syrup, paneer, chorizo, and goat’s cheese. Lastly they are redefining the boundaries of national food by integrating popular migrant foods, such as jerk chicken and saag aloo, within the casing of traditional British pie pastry. This redefinition of what is considered national food very much follows the recent history of food in Britain and in particular the important role played by migrants and their food cultures (Panayi, 2008).

Final thoughts

For me there are two interesting stories coming out of this research so far. The first is the current dynamism in British food culture. In face of food disruption, traditional pie and mash is being reinvented and reinterpreted, broadening the idea of what traditional and national food is, often through the inclusion of new ingredients and popular migrant food. In many ways the traditional pie pastry can be viewed as a symbol of a dynamic and multicultural British society in which the integration of new ideas, cultures and people is taking place (Panayi, 2008).

The second story is a more complicated and difficult one. There is no denying the fact that traditional pie and mash shops are struggling. Their struggle is related to issues of business rates and rents, but also to social and political disruptions that are reshaping communities. These disruptions are resulting in the loss of a particular white working class culinary heritage and communal space. The new restaurants that are replacing them do provide a wider range of choice, but without the same affordability, comfort and most importantly sense of community; in many ways one could argue that the new pie shops are meant to serve a wider and more financially secured population. The loss of so many shops raises the question of whether traditional shops should be protected and preserved. Several shop owners have called for either tax exemptions or the provision of special heritage status. The story of pie and mash in many ways reveals some of the tensions and dilemmas that arise as a result of food disruptions.

Reference list


