

The British do not have a great reputation for food. Indeed, it has often been said, and not only by the French, that, if hell exists, the cook there must be British. The Brits are accused of many culinary crimes, including boiling all the taste out of their vegetables, of drowning everything in vinegar and, generally, of failing to realize that cooking is an art and eating is a pleasure.

The reality, even if we speak only of tradition, is a little more complex. Even the occasional Frenchman has been heard to admit that, while the cook in hell probably is British, this applies only to lunch and dinner. At breakfast time, he's serving the people in heaven. The British breakfast is a rather heavenly thing. For a start, it's filling. Bacon, eggs, sausage, beans, mushrooms, tomatoes, fried bread - eat all that and you won't be hungry again until well into the afternoon. Also, as with any decent food, it's not only about the food itself. Associations are important. Most Brits, and a lot of foreigners too, for reasons we'll come back to, connect this breakfast with happy times such as leisure time or holidays.

Let's go beyond breakfast. While the French (and the Italians, Spanish, Chinese, Indians, Mexicans and numerous other nationalities) produce tastier meals than the British, this does not mean that British food cannot be enjoyed. What are some well-known dishes? Everyone knows fish and chips. If the fish is fresh, as it should be given that Britain is an island, this is good provided you don't follow the natives and go crazy with the vinegar bottle. Then there's the roast dinner, a Sunday institution. This consists of meat (chicken, lamb, beef or pork), roast potatoes, carrots and various other vegetables, mostly boiled or steamed. If the cook gets it right, these shouldn't be too soft or limp. Also, the British seem to know which sauce to put with which meat - thus horseradish with beef, apple sauce with pork, mint sauce with lamb and cranberry sauce with chicken or turkey. Shepherd's pie is a filling and warming (if not very exciting) dish. It's made with minced beef and onions, cooked with carrots, and possibly peas, and covered with layers of mashed potatoes. Finally, something just a little sweet. The British have another old and well-known ritual; tea and cakes in the afternoon. The best British cakes tend to be simple. They don't overwhelm you with sweetness or cream. People with a sweet tooth might be disappointed. However, again the joy is as much in the observance of the tradition as in the taste itself.

That was all about traditions but it doesn't tell the whole story. 200 or so years ago, Britain was a powerful country which colonized large parts of the world. The colonizers, rather like Jack in *Lord of the Flies*, often thought 'the British are best at everything' but they slowly came to realize that this was not true. One thing the locals tended to do better was cooking. Thus, the British began to acquire a taste for Indian food, Southern Chinese food and so on. Then, when people from the old colonies began to arrive in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s, they brought with them their recipes and cooking habits. Now, all small towns have at least an Indian and Chinese restaurant. London and Liverpool have 'chinatowns' where most of the businesses are restaurants or food-shops. Manchester and Bradford are better known for Indian restaurants than for anything traditionally British. Birmingham has its 'Balti Triangle' a large area of the city which gives its name to a dish originating from Pakistan. The food from the immigrant communities sometimes combines with traditional British food. For example, many people put curry sauce on their chips rather than vinegar. You can buy sandwiches or pies (both British inventions) with Indian or Chinese fillings. And so on.

At the same time, those aspects of the British eating culture considered traditional are now observed primarily by tourists. The stress and rush of modern society partly accounts for this. No one has time to cook bacon and eggs at home in the mornings anymore but, since many people, British and foreign, love to eat it on holiday, any self-respecting hotel or guesthouse has to offer it. The tea and cake afternoon ritual is also something you'll find more in hotels, and the most luxurious ones make a real art of it. However, fewer and fewer British women (and hardly any men at all!) bake cakes at home. The point is that cultures evolve. Britain, though it might not always want to be, is part of a contracting, globalised world. It has its own small influence, and tries to retain some of its traditions, but increasingly it is influenced by others. This is true in its architecture, its music, its sport and many other areas besides. But it is perhaps most true in its food.