

Bloomsbury Food Library – Introducing Food Studies

Article Aim: To provide introductory overviews of key topics in the field of Food Studies from a global perspective, supporting both students new to the field, as well as instructors seeking to expand their curriculum.

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| Summary Checklist   * Article should be approximately 1,500 words in total * Include 5 keywords relating to the subject to help aid online discovery of your article * Include a basic introduction to the topic being discussed * Provide a global, comparative overview of the topic, including; key scholarship and areas of debate; important resources; examples of how such resources can be applied to research and teaching * To conclude, describe the importance of the topic and outline any emerging trends for future academic research * Include 3-5 points for further discussion * Include a thorough bibliography of further reading, making sure all references are in the correct format |

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| Author | Bryce Evans |
| Author Affiliation | Professor of Modern World History, Liverpool Hope University |
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**Introduction**

300 words

Today the vast majority of British people have experienced a restaurant meal, but this was not always the case. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, dining in a restaurant was a social activity largely confined to the better-off. There was a working-class culture of clubs and pubs, and the popular chop house, but most people either ate at home or consumed meals like fish and chips, which were take-away rather than sit-down.

During the two world wars of the twentieth century this began to change as the government funded National Kitchens and British Restaurants: price-capped communal dining venues designed to combat wartime price inflation; secure nutritional standards and morale; and provide working and middle-class people with their first experience of restaurant dining. Despite the relative success and popularity of these ventures, cultural and class barriers remained and the restaurant meal was still largely associated with the wealthier classes.

In the post-war period, the picture began to change markedly. The expansion of consumer capitalism, rising living standards and enhanced social mobility, coupled with heightened cultural and leisure expectations, and – crucially – immigration, ensured that the landscape of restaurant dining in Britain was transformed. As the century progressed, dining in an Italian, Indian or Chinese restaurant became the new norm and different types of venue and cuisine were now available to more people than ever before.

The 2020-21 Covid-19 pandemic witnessed the UK Government again intervening with state subsidies (‘Eat Out to Help Out’) to assist private restaurants in keeping their doors open, a harbinger of how restaurants in Britain have struggled to retain footfall amid the cost-of-living crisis of 2022-23.

**Overview**

Restaurant dining is a significant theme within the field of Food Studies from a global perspective. While a relatively commonplace human experience, the culture, timing and nature of ‘eating out’ varies across national, regional and confessional boundaries. While much of the literature around restaurant dining centres on France, Britain is an interesting national case study in this global tale incorporating, as it does, dietary and nutritional transitions; the evolution of ‘fast food’; the role of the celebrity chef; and an ever-changing vista of popular dining venues.

The seminal history of restaurant dining in modern Britain is John Burnett’s *England Eats Out* (Burnett, 2004). Burnett explored commercial hospitality as an expression of lifestyle, status and entertainment. Burnett concentrates on themes such as etiquette to illustrate the class-divided nature of social dining in Britain, exploring how coffee and tea houses provided a popular complement to the rituals of ‘high dining’. Similar themes are covered in Derek Oddy’s *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food* (Oddy, 2003) which updates classic studies such as nutritionist Jack Drummond’s five-century study *The Englishman’s Food* (Drummond, 1939) by exploring the development of popular taste to incorporate previously scorned ‘ethnic’ cuisines, leading to the recent dominance of the curry house.

Although eating out in Britain has increasingly been segregated into national cuisines since the end of the Second World War, many British staples of restaurant dining in the preceding centuries were of course imports, notably curry and potatoes. Throughout the modern period, immigrants played a central role in the eating out experience in Britain, whether as restaurateurs, chefs, or waiters, and were present in dining venues from high-end eateries to fish and chip shops.

The history of the British Indian restaurant, complete with its colonial precedents, has been relayed (Collingham, 2005), a symbiotic relationship encapsulated in the 2001 announcement by British foreign secretary Robin Cook that chicken tikka masala was the new ‘national dish’ of Britain. The invention of a Bengali chef in a curry house in Glasgow in the 1970s who, in response to a customer’s complaint that his tikka was too dry, whipped up a gravy consisting largely of Campbell’s tomato soup, few other dishes are as symbolic of the way in which restaurants in Britain have come to embrace fusion food (or, from another viewpoint, practice cultural appropriation). In this latter light, the racism of patrons towards the staff of family-run ‘Indian’ restaurants – mostly run by Pakistani and Bangladeshi migrants has been the focus of sociological studies (see Palat, 2015).

The post-war explosion in ‘ethnic restaurants’ in Britain (Chinese, Italian, Thai, Greek, Turkish, Caribbean) is traced back to the rise of the Italian trattorias in the 1950s and 60s in (Mason, 2004). Alongside the end of rationing in 1954, the expansion of immigration to Britain in the 1950s changed the culinary landscape with migrant chefs amending recipes to appeal to increasingly affluent Britons, whether through restaurants branded along specifically national lines, or by groups such as Jews and Greek Cypriots opening restaurants selling overtly British products to a British clientele (Panayi 2008).

The pioneering foreign restaurant in Britain was the French restaurant and its cultural role in Britain has been examined through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (Kelly, 2021). Kelly essentially concurs with Stephen Mennell’s (Mennell, 1996) thesis that the relative impoverishment of British cuisine, historically, was in large part due to how the French restaurant became synonymous with cultivated taste embodied in celebrity chefs who ‘made it big’ in Britain both at court and in the popular imagination, from Auguste Escoffier (1846-1935) to Raymond Blanc (1949 -).

Quintessentially British ‘plain fare’ or ‘meat and two veg’ cuisine has received a negative press relative to the foreign gastronomic influences which have enriched the eating out scene, however the popularity of restaurants offering British fare has increased in the last twenty years. This is arguably attributable to a combination of celebrity chefs such as Tom Kerridge, who have championed home-grown produce, and a popular reversion to the notion of local food as preferable to the global/processed from a perspective of freshness, sustainability, and flavour. The state-supported ‘British Restaurant’, so-christened by wartime prime minister Winston Churchill, has also been re-examined in recent works such as Bryce Evans’ 2022 *Feeding the People in Wartime Britain* (Evans, 2022) which revises the less positive verdict of previous accounts of wartime social eating in the work of Peter Atkins (Atkins, 2011).

Lastly, the globalisation of taste in the latter half of the twentieth century has led to the ubiquitous fast food restaurant taking hold in Britain, with the McDonalds yellow ‘M’ the most readily recognisable symbol of how restaurant dining in Britain has been subject to hybridisation and transformation resulting, in the fast-food restaurant case, in a standardised (yet highly popular and reliable) sense of globalised sameness.

Due to the nature of the topic, much research on restaurants in Britain relies on a social history approach which embraces oral history as well as material culture artefacts. The British Library also holds a collection of manuscripts on the production, distribution and consumption of food in Britain and its empire throughout the 17th to 21st centuries, from the papers of 17th century trader John Stansfield up to 20th century materials in the Constitution Unit Archive on inspection of premises by the Food Standards Agency and interviews with restaurateurs from the food and agriculture oral histories collection. Similar resources can be accessed in the National Library of Scotland, London’s Guildhall Library, and the National Archives, which holds governmental records relating to the theme. And for British high-dining in its literal sense, see the British Airways menu collection at the BA Records Centre.

The Bloomsbury Food Library’s Illustrated Menu Collection is a useful resource for educators featuring, as it does, as menus from bygone restaurants in Britain. As a pedagogical tool, these are useful in illustrating the changing tastes of the British restaurant-going public. Nathalie Cook’s Lesson Plan provides a useful example of the use of these menus in a classroom environment.

**Conclusion**

Restaurants in Britain have had a hybrid character for much of the modern period. Although British ‘plain fare’ is associated with historic eateries like the chop house and the wartime ‘British Restaurant’, the place of immigrants in the British restaurant scene was well established before the twentieth century and early globalisation and imperial trade ensured that even the most quintessentially ‘British’ of dining experiences had the whiff of foreign flavour. In particular, the cultural hegemony of French *haute cuisine* gastronomy secured the status and role of the foreign waiter, chef or restaurateur as a highlight of the dining experience (Lane, 2011). This was a world which remained divided along class lines and restaurant eating was restricted, largely, to the upper classes prior to the social changes wrought by the world wars. Post-war, the end of rationing, increased immigration and the expansion of consumer tastes and purchasing power led to an expansion of the British restaurant scene along largely ‘ethnic’ or national lines. At the same time, the forces of international marketing, globalisation and ‘Coca-Colonization’ have seen the rise of the standardised fast-food restaurant along the American model (Hawkes, 2006). In recent decades, British cuisine has undergone a boost in popularity as the primacy of local ingredients has become a desirable feature of restaurant dining, yet the ‘eating out’ scene in Britain is today eclectic and full of choice demarcated along national lines.

**Points for Consideration**

To what extent, historically, can the food on offer in restaurants in Britain be considered ‘British’?

How has state-supported restaurant dining featured in modern British history?

How has the cuisine offered in restaurants in Britain changed over the past 200 years?

What were the main reasons behind the explosion in ‘ethnic restaurants’ after the Second World War?

**Recommended Reading**

Atkins, P.J. 2011. “Communal Feeding in War Time: British Restaurants, 1940–1947.” In *Food and War in Twentieth Century Europe*, edited by I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, R. Duffett and A. Drouard, 139–153. Farnham, England: Ashgate.

Burnett, John. 2004. *England Eats Out:* *A Social History of*Eating Out*in*England*from 1830 to the Present.* London: Routledge.

Collingham, Lizzie. 2006. *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Evans, Bryce. 2022. *Feeding the People in Wartime Britain*. London: Bloomsbury.

# Hawkes, Corinna. 2006. ‘Uneven dietary development: linking the policies and processes of globalization with the nutrition transition, obesity and diet-related chronic diseases’ in Globalization and Health 2,4 (open access).

Kelly, Debra. *Fishes with funny French Names: The French Restaurant in London from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

# Lane, Christel. 2011. ‘Culinary culture and globalization. An analysis of British and German Michelin-starred restaurants’ in *British Journal of Sociology* 62, 4, pp. 696-717.

Meah, Angela. 2015. “Eating.” In *Food Words: Essays In Culinary Culture*, edited by Peter Jackson, 68–72. London: Bloomsbury Academic. DOI: [10.5040/9781350042278-022?locatt=label:secondary\_bloomsburyFoodLibrary](http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350042278-022?locatt=label:secondary_bloomsburyFoodLibrary).

# Mennell, Stephen. 1996. *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Second Edition). Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Oddy, Derek. 2004. *From Plain Fare to Fusion*Food*: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s*. London: Boydell.

Palat, Ravi Arvind. 2015. ‘Empire, Food and the Diaspora: Indian Restaurants in Britain’ in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, 2, pp. 171-186.

Jeffrey M. Pilcher ed. 2014. Food History: Critical and Primary Sources. London: Bloomsbury.

**Key works from the Bloomsbury Food Library platform**

Alan Warde, Continuity and Change in British Restaurants, 1951-2001: Evidence from the Good Food Guide

Joanne Hollows, Celebrity Chefs, Food and Nation

Illustrated Menu Collection, 1830-1951

Nathalie Cooke, Lesson Plan: Introduction to the Illustrated Menu Collection

The Bloomsbury Handbook of Indian Cuisine

Bryce Evans, Social Eating Bibliographic Guide

Bryce Evans, Nutritional Reform and Public Feeding in Britain, 1917-1919