

The Londoner's meal

Globalization transforms societies, economies and cultures. As a subject, food allows us to draw unique narratives on these transformations. The history of pie and mash, also known as the 'Londoner's meal', is such a story of globalization.

In 2019, F. Cooke's century-old pie and mash shop in east London closed down.

The shop was just one in a very long line of historic pie and mash shops, many of which were over a century old, that have closed down in recent years — A. J. Goddard, a pie and mash shop based in Deptford, east London, closed down in 2018 after 128 years of operation.

Throughout the twentieth century, pie and mash was one of the most popular meals in and around London. Specialized pie and mash shops also served as communal spaces central to the urban and social fabric of many communities¹. The closure of so many shops (alongside traditional pubs, cafes, and fish and chip shops) has been described as part of a wider decline in traditional English culture and identity.

The origins of pie and mash, like many well-known dishes, such as fish and chips, are somewhat shrouded in mystery. Pie sellers were a prominent feature of Victorian London, satisfying a demand for cheap, hot and transportable food. The pies were aimed at the expanding working class, fuelled by the growth and prominence of the east London docks. Though pie fillings varied, they were initially associated with eels, a feature that still endures in many pie and mash shops, in the form of either jellied or stewed eels.

During their heyday, between World War I and II, there were over 150 pie and mash shops in London. The shops were predominantly family owned, and employed and catered to people from their local communities. The food they served was seen as honest, simple and affordable. From their inception, pie and mash shops were associated with English working-class culture and identity, and more specifically east London identity² — although immigration, particularly from Europe, played a significant part in the emergence and growth of pie and mash. Several of the prominent families that dominated the trade were migrants, notably the Cookes and the Manzes, who were Irish and Italian, respectively³.

Globalization and migration, however, have also been blamed for the decline of the old pie and mash shops. New arrivals, bringing with them different food traditions, have replaced older communities that have been pushed out by the redevelopment of east London and its increasingly unaffordable housing⁴. Traditional pie and mash shops



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have also suffered, alongside other business, from the protracted slump in high-street trade. The rapid increase in rents and business rates, often connected to gentrification, and increased competition, particularly from high-street food chains, has taken a toll. In many ways, from their interior and clientele to the food and prices they offer, the old pie and mash shops increasingly resemble Victorian anachronisms in a multicultural and cosmopolitan modern Britain.

The state of historic shops might give the impression that pie eating is also in decline — but nothing could be further from the truth. It could be argued that pie eating in Britain is going through a renaissance, with pies appearing more fashionable than ever. The Cornish pasty, a pie closely associated with Cornwall, has even received the official Protected Geographical Indication status from the European Union. Trendy new pie restaurants are opening up across the country, many blending in several different British food traditions. These 'newer' shops appear to be more in tune with changing food preferences and diets, providing for example a variety of global flavoured pies, such as chicken tikka masala, arguably a British national dish, as well as vegan and vegetarian options.

There is, however, no denying that the decline of historic pie and mash shops signifies a loss of British culinary heritage as well as a working class communal space. It is not surprising to learn that there have been calls, particularly from shop owners, for the provision of either tax exemptions or special heritage status for existing shops. In many ways, historic pie and mash shops illustrate some of the tensions that occur as a result of globalization, migration and changing diets, and raise questions regarding what should be considered traditional food, and when it should be protected and preserved. □

Ronald Ranta 

Department of Politics, Kingston University, Kingston, UK.

e-mail: ronald.ranta@kingston.ac.uk

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