



the BRITISH EMPIRE

Traditionally, English cuisine has existed mainly as the butt of jokes. But a new crop of chefs has changed that perception

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At The Fat Radish, a British expat-owned restaurant in Manhattan, there are the coolest bar stools. Round wooden seats rest atop swinging black-metal arms attached to white wainscoting on the wall. Pull one out from under the bar. After dinner, tuck it away. It's genius, really.

Those bar stools are made of classic industrial materials, but at the same time they're modern and innovative. They're a nice metaphor for what's happening at The Fat Radish and places like it all over the East Coast: Old-school British cooking is being refashioned into something shiny and new. U.K. cuisine, meet U.S. culture.

No longer the butt of jokes, modern British chefs use fresh ingredients and have even fresher ideas. Oysters with

briny pickle juice at The Breslin in Manhattan. Montauk diver scallops with purslane and peppers at The Fat Radish. These dishes are fun and full of flavor, and you don't have to go to a fussy four-star restaurant to enjoy them.

It didn't happen overnight. Food writers like Elizabeth David started proselytizing cooking with fresh ingredients back in the 1950s.

Television cooks helped, too: Delia Smith reminded Britons how to boil an egg and Nigella Lawson made it sexy. Stodgy dishes like beef-and-kidney pie and bangers

and mash were reborn out of the age of avocado appliances at the same time Fergus Henderson, the humble chef-owner of St. John in London, wrote a book on the virtues of nose-to-tail eating and Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, celebrity chef and food writer, starred in television shows about farm-to-table eating.



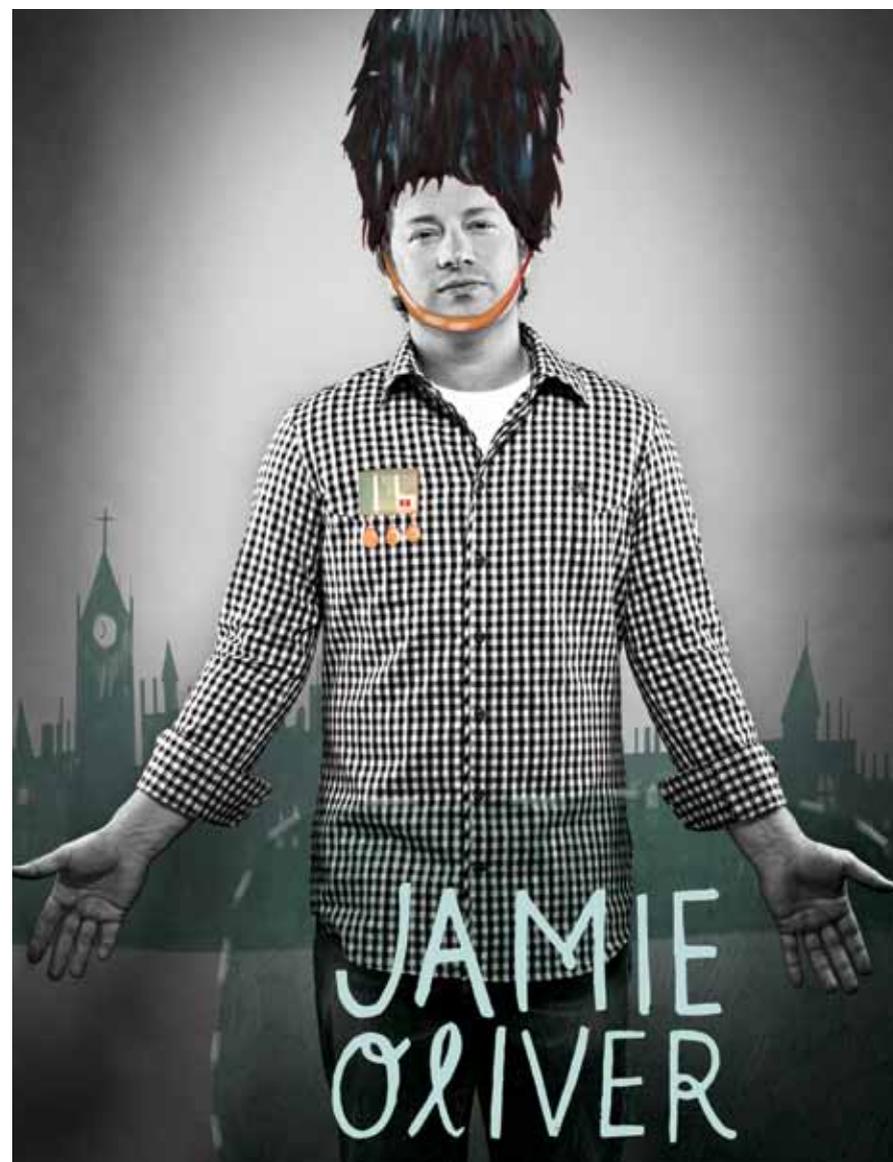
This page: The interior at the Dandelion in Philadelphia. Opposite: The Dandelion's take on a classic: Bangers and Mash.

Then Gordon Ramsay and Jamie Oliver thrust British restaurants into the spotlight. And April Bloomfield, chef of Manhattan restaurants The Spotted Pig and The Breslin, became nearly single-handedly responsible for the rise of the American gastropub. And today, a new wave of Britons such as Ben Towill and Phil Winser have taken the baton. They opened the Fat Radish, a British-American hybrid of a restaurant where you thwack your spoon into a buttery pastry crust and discover not an unidentifiable gloppy mess of meat, but gorgeous green, sweet, farm-fresh peas, which you should swirl with a dollop of tart crème fraîche.

“There’s an exciting food movement in the U.K. right now,” says Bloomfield.

“WE’VE ALWAYS SAID THAT ENGLAND IS LIKE A BATH AND AMERICA IS LIKE A SHOWER. IT ALL HAPPENS HERE.”

“Chefs and restaurateurs are redefining British cuisine and the likes of Jamie Oliver, Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Fergus Henderson have propelled British cuisine into people’s minds as delicious and exhilarating.”



It Wasn't Always So Terrible

“One cannot trust people whose cuisine is so bad,” reporters overheard French President Jacques Chirac joke to Vladimir Putin and Gerhard Schröder in 2005. “After Finland, Britain is the country with the worst food in the world.”

It wasn’t always so terrible, but the quality of British cuisine has gone through fits and starts, says Kate Colquhoun, the author of *Taste: The Story of Britain Through Its Cooking* (Bloomsbury, 2008). Remember, she says, England was an empire—a nation of conquerors who brought back ingredients and spices from its far-off colonies. (Did you know chicken tikka masala is a British invention?) But then the Industrial Revolution sent good ingredients the way of hand-tilled fields.

“Because we industrialized first and fastest, people divorced from the sources of their food,” says Colquhoun. “They were no longer with their extended families, growing and procuring ingredients. The cuisine became massively adulterated.”

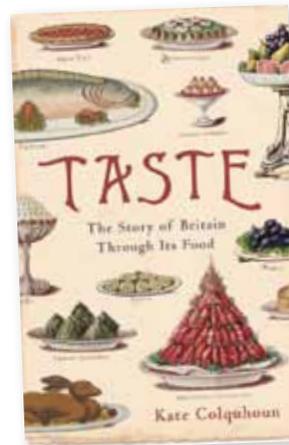
Toward the end of the 19th century, there was a brief renaissance of good food, she says, with clean ingredients and pure flavors. But World War I changed that: Rations made even simple ingredients scarce, and cooks tried to make up for it with overcooked stews and over-sauced vegetables.

And, unlike France or Italy, the U.K. has never had much of a rural cooking tradition, she says. “Our cuisine has never really been peasant food, and that’s why during hard times, we found it harder to cope.”

A bright spot came when postwar immigrants from the Mediterranean in the 1920s and 1930s brought sunny, flavorful foods, such as tomatoes, lemons, garlic and peaches. And Italian and French methods—fresh ingredients, treated simply—were adapted into British cooking. Then, yes: another war. More rations. More stews.

The second wave of immigration after World War II brought those Mediterranean flavors back again, and cookbook authors like Elizabeth David, one of the most famous of all food writers, taught home cooks how to use them.

“David in the 1950s didn’t come out of nowhere,” says Colquhoun. “She came out of a nation that had fallen back in love with tomatoes and olive oil.”



Top to bottom: Interior of John Dory Oyster Bar; Kate Colquhoun’s book on British culinary history; April Bloomfield’s lamb burger at The Breslin.



But then, she says, came the final blow: supermarkets, freezers and microwaves. “So it’s one long line stretching back to the 19th century,” she says. “And there has been a renaissance growing right through, despite those great hurdles that were put in the way. There’s always been so much to trip us up.”

Good Food in a Casual Setting

If you’ve eaten at The Breslin, you’ll find it hard to imagine anything ever went wrong across the pond. Dishes such as beef and Stilton pie, scrumpets with



mint vinegar, pork scratchings, Scotch egg, and piccalilli with pork terrine drip with fat and flavor. And at both The Breslin and The Spotted Pig, an American classic—the hamburger—has become the restaurant’s signature dish. At The Spotted Pig, it’s chargrilled beef with Roquefort and shoestring fries; at The Breslin, a lamb burger with feta, cumin-mayo and thrice-cooked potatoes.

It’s that special hybrid of British sense and American sensibility that gave Bloomfield her ticket to success. She was cooking at London’s famous River

Café when Jamie Oliver (also an alum) recommended her for the chef’s job at The Spotted Pig, which Mario Batali and Ken Friedman were opening in 2003. Good food in a causal setting may seem old hat these days, but at the time, it was groundbreaking. The Pig was a runaway smash, and it spawned a new genre of American restaurants.

The Fat Radish is the next generation. The room, with its whitewashed brick walls and big mirrors, is light and airy, just like the menu. Even the Scotch egg, that famous British dish of a hard-boiled egg

The British Invasion

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The Breslin

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The Dandelion

124 S. 18th St., Philadelphia
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thedandelionpub.com

The Fat Radish

17 Orchard St., Manhattan
212-300-4053,
thefatradishnyc.com

Gordon Ramsay at The London NYC

151 W. 54th St., Manhattan
866-690-2029, thelondonnyc.com

The Leadbelly

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646-596-9142

Ruschmeyer's

161 Second House Road, Montauk,
N.Y. 631-668-2877, kingandgrove.com/montauk-hotels/ruschmeyers

The Spotted Pig

314 W. 11th St., Manhattan
212-620-0393, thespottedpig.com

Tea & Sympathy

108 Greenwich Ave.,
Manhattan. 212-989-9735,
teaandsympathynewyork.com

wrapped in sausage and bread crumbs and fried, somehow dances spryly on your tongue.

Owners Towill and Winser made their names catering for the fashion world, then opened a restaurant they knew would appeal to the same crowd. Their philosophy is much like Bloomfield's: Cook simple, seasonal food and serve it in a relaxed setting. After The Fat Radish, they opened Ruschmeyer's in Montauk, N.Y., in 2011, and most recently opened The Leadbelly, an oyster and cocktail bar across from The Fat Radish.

"You're really catering to your neighborhood," says Towill. "People should be coming in two times a week, so it really has to feel like home and you have to cook like you're cooking for guests."

Towill, who grew up in Cornwall, points to a move away from fine dining and toward the local food movement as the main reason British cuisine has climbed out of the doldrums.

"Britain is smaller, so it has this incredible sense of regional cuisine," he says. "In Cornwall, there's great seafood, and clotted cream is just in that area. In Northern England, Lancashire and going into Wales, there's incredible lamb and cheese and cider. And now in Sussex, they're producing great, award-winning sparkling wine. So in a place as small as England, to have this incredible diversity is pretty awesome."

Pub Food in America

So, yes, there is good food in Britain. And if you ask Nicky Perry, the owner of A Salt & Battery and Tea & Sympathy in Manhattan, there always has been.

"Americans are beginning to realize that this old myth that English food is terrible—it really is a myth. Because Americans are so entrenched in restaurant culture and food, it's a big thing here. But there are loads of crappy restaurants in New York. It's a myth that English food is bad."

Perry was a pioneer when she opened Tea & Sympathy 22 years ago, and her faithful reproductions of British classics have been drawing expats and locals alike ever since. She's doing British food the



One of many in Lawson's cookbook series.

way it's supposed to be done. And she's not the only one. The fish and chips entrée at The Dandelion is on its way to becoming the paragon of British pub food in America. *Philadelphia Inquirer* restaurant critic Craig LaBan said the dish has "as magnificent a piece of fried fish as I've ever had."

Chef Robert Aikens, who was born in England and has cooked at Michelin-starred Le Gavroche in London, takes beautiful, flaky cod from Chatham and fries it in beef fat he fashions from the restaurant's trimmings and ground scraps he gets from his supplier, the celebrity meat purveyor Pat LaFrieda.

"It adds another depth of flavor," he says. Agreed. And when you're enjoying the dish in a setting meticulously created by owner Stephen Starr, who went to the U.K. to find everything from a Churchill bust to the crocheted wall hangings, it makes it all the better.

The effort Starr put into re-creating a classic British pub demonstrates something uniquely American: the entrepreneurial spirit. And British innovators have taken risks here in the U.S. they might not have otherwise.

"I've embraced my British roots more since coming to the U.S., especially with The Breslin," says Bloomfield. "I'm not sure I would have done that if I had stayed in England because I'm so passionate about Italian food at the same time."

At Ruschmeyer's in Montauk, owned by the Fat Radish duo, the setting is like summer camp for adults: an outdoor dining room, a wooden canopy, long picnic tables, plaid seat cushions and paper lanterns. The menu has clam pizza. Tuna-watermelon salad. Tilefish with fennel. There's a pingpong table and a tepee in the courtyard. Would that style of restaurant work in England? Hard to say. But there's no question that here, it's just the kind of place that has been changing minds about what it means for a restaurant to be British in America.

In the U.S., there's a sense that things can happen, says Towill, "that you can do stuff and people will be interested and give something a go. We've always said that England is like a bath and America is like a shower. It all happens here." ☞

