

times modern

# When the chips are down...

Fish and chip shops are taking a battering but can a new breed of chippy save our national dish, asks **Nick Wyke**

**T**here are few food topics that arouse as much emotion as fish and chips. It's a subject that's hardwired to the hearts and bellies of Britons and

readers tend to have fierce loyalties. Typically, they write to berate the exclusion of a local chippy from a round-up, to boast about its queues and to sing the praises of its crispy, golden batter, twice-fried fluffy chips or moist flaky (in a good way) fish. Rather like a favourite newspaper or football team, a trusted chip shop plays an important part in many people's lives. But the announcement last week that Harry Ramsden's is to close its original fish and chips restaurant in Guiseley, near Leeds, has raised concerns that the great British institution that is fish and chips is under threat.

The fears are not unfounded. When Ramsden opened his first shop in 1928, serving out of a wooden hut beside a tram stop, his famous headline act was considered the national dish, at least on Fridays — these days chicken tikka masala seems to have poached that title in polls. There were about 35,000 fish and chip shops in the UK in the 1930s and their stock-in-trade was one of the few foods not rationed during the Second World War.

Now, despite a population increase of nearly 20 million, there are fewer than 10,500 fish and chip shops. Like pubs, and the newspapers that fish and chips once came wrapped in, they are, at least numerically, in decline.

How come? First, there is a lot more competition, especially from the likes of fried chicken, pizza, burger and kebab shops. These low-quality fast-food outlets tend to attract young people and families who haven't grown up on the romance of seaside fish suppers. The food is hot, convenient and tasty, to them at least. And price-wise, deep-fried bits of battered chicken dusted in mung-rich flavoured oil sell for half as much as a piece of cod, due in part to price increases in diesel for fishing vessels and oil for fryers.

"Not only do people have more choice now, but the base level of the fast-casual sector, especially in metropolitan areas, has improved beyond belief," says William Drew,

editor of *Restaurant* magazine. "The mainstream fish and chip shop guy who is not meticulous about fresh fish and changing the oil is being left behind."

Supermarkets have also been aggressively promoting "line-in" options which, according to Emily Howgate, of the Seafood Choices Alliance, have hit "fish and chip shops hard". The latest market report from the NPD Group and Crest shows that fish and chip shop sales have declined 6 per cent year-on-year. It's hardly

surprising, says the chef and restaurateur Mark Hix, given that the "average high street chippy just sees food as a freezer-to-fryer commodity". Our attitudes towards a dish that has a deep childhood resonance for many people have also changed. Some people spoke to said that it had been relegated to an occasional holiday treat, while others — particularly tired parents — still ate it once a fortnight, often on Fridays. A smaller group were wary of fried food from a local chippy that looked stuck in the Seventies and even felt their palates had "outgrown" such a heavily salted and vinegary, hot, fatty meal. "The smell is so seductive and full of memories but halfway through a portion, if it's not the real thing, you want to give up and are left with a greasy, floury aftertaste," says Drew.

Health concerns seem to be another nail in the coffin and yet people who worry about their waistlines often feel that more wholesome alternatives, such as grilled batter-free fish, are a poor substitute.

It's this sort of niggling uncertainty that angers Gregg Howard, president of the National Federation of Fish Friers (NFFF) and owner of two Our Place fish and chip shops in the Midlands. He peddles the line that fish and chips is a "highly nutritious meal and part of a balanced diet", at least in comparison with a sweet and sour pork or chicken korma takeaway. "Fish and chips is an amazing fresh product made to order. Now that's something that McDonald's hasn't got," claims Howard, who sells a portion of "wild" cod, poached in a light batter with chips made from spuds from a farm five miles away, for about a fiver. "We've won two world wars on it," he adds proudly.

Back in the heyday of fish and chips in the 1930s, or even a generation ago, hungry customers and shopowners were unlikely to have given a flying fish



GEMMA MARRAS, JOHN CLARKE

about the sustainable sourcing of seafood or the gentrification of menus and shop interiors. Now, judges for the National Fish & Chip Awards 2012, held in January and run by the seafood industry authority, SeaFish, actively seek out shops that use locally farmed potatoes and fish from protected or sustainable stocks. Similarly, alongside high-profile campaigns against overfishing, the fish2fork website offers sustainable ratings for fish restaurants and some fish and chip shops. In the latest results, two chippies ranked higher than Michelin-starred places: the Harbour Lights in Falmouth, Cornwall, and the Bay Fish & Chips in Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire, scored four and a half blue fish, where the top score is five blue fish and the bottom is five red fish. "Given the volumes of fish consumed in fish and chip shops [382 million meals a year, according to SeaFish] it's important that they are held accountable," says Charles Clover, founder of fish2fork, and author of *The End of the Line*. "Historically, they've been a place to launder low-quality fish. Their fish often contained worms, which once cooked became transparent and invisible."

He points out that all 32 of Harry Ramsden's restaurants received a score of 1.5 red fish, including the Guiseley branch. "It's not great given that they don't serve caviar or bluefin tuna [the two worst offenders on the sustainability scale]. Just because it's not some fancy restaurant consumers shouldn't be passive and accept second best."

When it comes to ethical choices, it's up to both shopowners and customers to do their bit, and despite the harsh economic climate, Drew says changes are starting to take

## 5 chippies with a difference

**Poppies of Spitalfields, London E1** Such is the craze for vintage that E1 London now has its own retro chippy, opened this year by a family that has been serving fish and chips in the East End since 1945. The look is diner meet wartime Blighty, with vintage aprons and memorabilia from when a fish supper was unchallenged as the nation's favourite dish.  
020-7247 0892; poppiesfishandchips.co.uk

**Oileys, Heme Hill, South London** Inspired by a couple of friends with wheat and gluten intolerances, this "olde worlder" fish and chip restaurant has a gluten-free Tuesday when all the batter is made with a mix of non-wheat flours and potato starch.  
020-8671 8259; oileys.info

**Frankies, Grayshott, Surrey** Small village chippy, taken over by a London couple a year ago, that does children's fish and chip parties with mini portions and ice-cream to finish.  
01428 608020; fishalfrankies@gmail.com

**Aldeburgh Fish and Chips, Suffolk** Has its own queue webcam to help customers to gauge the least crowded time to visit — not a bad idea, given that there are queues of more than 100 people in summertime.  
01728 454635; chipshopqueue.co.uk

**Towngate Fisheries, Isle, Bradford, Yorkshire** Mark Drummond has harnessed social media to drum up business at his, award-winning fish and chip shop. He has a clear website with a lively comment stream, posts regular offers on Facebook and Twitter, and runs loyalty schemes and text promotions.  
01926 855326; alfegrimshaw.co.uk

