

## Fish & Chips: A History

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[Food & Drink](#)

### ***Fish & Chips: A History***

*Panikos Panayi Reaktion 176pp £18*

This is the best history yet written of a British institution. Like Panayi's earlier work, *Spicing Up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food* (2008), this one is alive to the cosmopolitan origins of food through global migration.

The tradition of frying potatoes – shared with the French – dates back to the early 19th century, while the frying of fish was a Yiddish tradition, imported by Eastern European Jews who settled in the East End of London. 'Rather than marrying', says Panayi, 'the two products courted and gradually moved in together as the century progressed.'

Wider availability of fish in urban Britain was key: fleets of trawlers, better refrigeration techniques and faster rail transport made fish more affordable and less perishable. The standardisation of frying machines led to the creation of designated fish and chip shops: 12,000 in Britain by 1888 rising to 25,000 by 1910 and spreading from seaside resorts to the inner city.

It became a staple of the working-class diet during the First World War, providing a cheap and relatively nutritious hot meal. The trade was also an easy way for entrepreneurial Britons to earn a living, although the profit margins were too small for large chains to be established, so the 'chippie' retained its personal, neighbourhood character.

Panayi gets the nuances of national cultures within the British Isles. He shows that Italian immigrants largely ran fish and chip shops in Scotland, as well as controlling the ice cream trade; the dish also spread to Ireland, becoming a shared culture amid the political conflict between the British and Irish.

The trade declined after the Second World War (by 2003 the number of chippies had fallen to 8,600). The arrival of Chinese, Indian and Cypriot takeaways ate into the popularity of fish and chips from the 1960s; so, too, did the American hamburger after the arrival of McDonald's in 1974. Health concerns about fatty food undermined the dish's middle-class market, while the overfishing of cod stocks made fish and chips more expensive for poorer Britons than newer fast foods like the kebab.

Yet the dish survived, partly because it was marketed in a more patriotic way in order to distinguish it from 'foreign' rivals. The world sees fish and chips as quintessentially British but it was not exported as successfully as the hamburger, although this added to the patriotic allure of the dish for Britons queasy about postwar Americanisation.

Panayi does not sufficiently discuss the impact of America on British food; and there is not enough on why the British liked fish and chips: how much did their enjoyment come from a sense of tucking into Britishness, the collective physical consumption of a nebulous national identity? The book would be tastier if Panayi had augmented his story of the frying industry with salty first-hand accounts from diaries and magazines; there is also little on how fish and chips was represented in music hall, film and television.

Nonetheless, this is a rewarding read for anyone interested in the history of Britain; so good in fact that it made me venture out on a windy night to buy a fish supper at my traditional local chippie, expertly run by Kemahl, a Turkish Cypriot immigrant.

**Richard Weight** is the author of *Mod: A Very British Style* (The Bodley Head, 2013).

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