

British foods raise some intriguing questions about our past. Why are we a nation of curry lovers, with a taste for piquant pickles next to plainly cooked meats? What made us eat fish and chips? And what on earth is Marmite all about?

The bedrock of our food is the land and sea. Rainfall and a mild, island climate provide lush pastures for feeding cattle and sheep; our coastline (nobody is more than 75 miles from the sea) delivers plenty of fish; our copious fuel has long enabled us to bake and roast; our fields of barley and northern climate mean we mostly produce beer rather than wine. But this, of course, is only part of the story: our culture has been stirred up by the influence of many cultures over many centuries.

Romans

The four hundred years of Roman occupation brought the first of many foreign influences to our shores. Orchards, vineyards, herbs and their beloved spice, mustard, were



Normans and medieval period

A more refined native cuisine took root after the Normans introduced new ingredients and techniques. Returning Crusaders helped promote exotic flavours such as rose-water (still familiar in Turkish Delight), almonds and sugar. Expensive spices were kept under lock-and-key and put into special dishes that come down to us in such festive foods as Christmas pudding and mince pies.

The sixteenth to eighteenth centuries

After the Reformation, the British Isles were increasingly set apart from the courtly, Catholic cuisines of the continent. At the same time, improved methods of farming brought better ingredients. Both factors encouraged a simpler style of cooking which relied on the flavours of good produce. Meat took pride of place over the fish associated with Catholic fast days, and such dishes as roast beef increasingly became a symbol of national pride. Many imported foods were highly prized, as well: when the Great Fire of London swept through London in 1666, the diarist Samuel Pepys took the trouble to bury his hunk of Italian Parmesan for safe-keeping.

productivity, and many of our special native foods dwindled. There is, however, a reversal of this trend as people shop at farmers' markets, farm shops, specialists and local shops, looking for fresh, seasonal ingredients and produce such as native British meat breeds.



As well as exploring the cuisines of other cultures, chefs and home-cooks are now rediscovering recipes from the past, to find traditional ways of using native ingredients. After losing touch with the land and its produce, we are now going back to our roots.

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Here are just a few of Britain's famous foods: Blue Cheshire cheese, Game Casserole, Upside Down Cake, Poached Pears, Roast Pork, Somerset Brie, Double Gloucester, Cornish Blue, Blue Vinny, Cotswold Lamb, Blackberry & Apple Pie, Wild Mushrooms, Potted Shrimps, Beef Wellington, Fish Pie, Steak and Kidney Pie, Bramley Apples, Cox's Apples, Ginger Bread, Northumberland Gouda, Grouse, Venison, Swaledale Cheese, Wensleydale, Pigeon Pie, Steamed Mussels, Wild Duck, Steak Diane, Artichokes, Black Pudding, Lancashire Hot Pot,

A potted history of British food

introduced; cheese-making thrived, pheasants and rabbits became part of the countryside and geese and guinea fowl part of the farmyard.

Anglo-Saxons

The Anglo-Saxons had a fund of sophisticated herbal lore and such plants as watercress and camomile began to be regarded as especially healthy. The peasant staples were bread and a dish known as pottage, a thick soup made of peas, beans or cereals, rather like today's porridge. Wild pigs had been domesticated by the tenth century and economically fed on household scraps and woodland forage. They provided a source of meat for people for many centuries. Their meat was salted and preserved to last through the

year in such forms as sausages and bacon.

Wild foods were valued with blackberries and raspberries being added to bread to make an early version of summer pudding.



Nineteenth century

Industrialisation wrought great changes on our diet. Fish and chips combined the fried potatoes of the industrial northern towns and cities with the fried fish of Jewish traders in London.

Marmite was invented in the nineteenth century as a handy way to use up the yeast that was a by-product of the brewing industry. The British Empire continued to make exotic tastes part of our national palate. Queen Victoria had a curry made daily in case of visitors from India, and that British stalwart, Worcestershire sauce, was first made in 1835, based on a recipe brought back from India, whilst Mrs Beeton includes mango chutney and chilli vinegar in her *Book of Household Management*.

Twentieth century

Today, we have both more choice, and less. The deprivations of two world wars and 14 years of rationing left us with a food policy geared towards

Gloucestershire Old Spot, Corn on the Cob, Fish & Chips, Raspberry Ice Cream, Bread and Butter Pudding, Parsnips, Savoy Cabbage, Elderflower Cordial, Goose, Brussel Sprouts, Saltmarsh Lamb, Heather-fed Lamb, Gammon, Pork Pies, Sausages, Marrows, Rhubarb & Custard, Cumbrian Air Dried Ham, Leeks, Shortcake, Mackerel, Haddock, Prawns, Stilton, Sea Bass, Trout, Turbot...

