

As nice as pie

A source of both sustenance and great delight, the pie is rightly taking centre stage once more as a great British dish, says Flora Watkins

OUR love affair with the pie begins in infancy. We learn at our mother's knee, from Little Jack Horner and Simple Simon, that they contain good things. We grow up speaking a language richly seasoned with pie-related idioms. One might indulge in pie in the sky or have to eat humble pie (from 'umbles'—the entrails of the deer that were eaten by the lower orders as the Lord of the Manor enjoyed the venison).

By the time we are grown, pies, in all their glory, are part of our very marrow. Much like ham (*'That'll do, pig', November 28, 2018*), they're a democratic food, enjoyed by everyone from dukes to Dickensian ragamuffins, marquesses to miners.

‘There's hardly a part of the human senses that isn't seduced by a well-made pie’

You're as likely to tuck into one on a smart shoot lunch as you are on the football terraces (although less likely, perhaps, to hear chants of 'Who ate all the pies?' at the former).

'Pies are a source of great comfort,' enthuses Matthew Fort, former food-and-drink editor of *The Guardian*. 'It's partly to do with the excitement of a parcel: the anticipation of what's inside, the marvellous contrast of textures... the crumbling pastry, the sloppiness of gravy, the rich perfume when you open it up. There's hardly a part of the human senses that isn't seduced by a well-made pie.'

Mr Fort laments that, in his capacity as a judge on the BBC TV show *The Great British Menu*, he doesn't see many pies. There's the odd *pithivier* (the French version), but that's about it.

This is a travesty, because the pie is one of our truly great British dishes. Matthew O'Callaghan, who chairs the Melton Mowbray Pork Pie Association, host of the annual British Pie Awards in Melton Mowbray, believes they represent 'our greatest contribution to world cuisine'.

As the man who spearheaded that region's efforts to secure PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) status under European law

for its pork pies, Mr O'Callaghan endured many a snooty Frenchman asking him: 'How can you possibly ask for the status of Champagne?' Happily, the EU agreed with Leicestershire's pie champion and granted the coveted PGI in 2009.

A good pie nourishes those parts that Champagne cannot reach and is far more evocative than Proust's madeleine, tapping into our collective history as well as our own personal memories.

'Whenever I eat a pie, it transports me back to the family table and my Mum's simple, homely fare,' says Calum Franklin, head chef at Holborn Dining Room, London WC1.

'I like food that does that—we play on it here in the restaurant,' he divulges. 'I don't like fussy, over-complicated dishes. I prefer to use really good ingredients and keep it simple and a pie is a good way of doing that.'

Mr Franklin estimates that of the 600–700 covers he oversees each day, half will have one of his pies. Many will sample his hot pork pie, which has been eulogised by *The Observer's* restaurant critic, Jay Rayner, but Mr Franklin's curried-mutton pie, served with mango salsa and a 'chip-shop curry sauce', has gone 'really well with the guests'.

Each of the five pies on the menu has a different pastry, because 'it must suit what's inside'. A forensic level of detail has gone into the pastry, which took a year to perfect.

Last year, Mr Franklin opened the Pie Room, next to the restaurant. Here, four additional chefs create exquisitely decorated hot and cold pies, sold to the public through a hatch on High Holborn. With its marble-topped table and Mr Franklin's collection of antique copper moulds on the walls, the design was based on old Victorian pie rooms, which used to be found above most pubs in the City, 'but are dying out. For me, it's an important part of our food history'.

Pies have been a feature of British cookery since at least the Middle Ages, although the pastry—of hot water and flour—used to be inedible. Known as coffyns, the pastry vessels were used to cook and store the contents, before being discarded.

By the Tudor period, edible pastry was being widely used and elaborate, decorated pies were often sent as gifts at Christmas. >

Reviving a Victorian staple: pie aficionado Calum Franklin in his Holborn Pie Room





Sure to keep the hardest worker going all day: the Pie Room's succulent black-pudding pie

Live ingredients—four and 20 blackbirds—were sometimes baked into a pie to entertain guests. In the 1700s, mutton pies known as Kit-Cats (made by Christopher 'Kit' Cat) fuelled the discussions of progressive Whig group the Kit-Cat Club, to which they gave their name.

Being portable, pies have also been the perfect 'meals on wheels' for working men throughout history, adds Mr Fort, for whom the hot pies of Lancashire are 'the cotton-mill equivalent of the Cornish pasty'.

Perhaps surprisingly, our national favourite, steak and kidney, is a comparatively recent dish. The first recipe appears in *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, published in instalments from 1859.

The pie's reputation took a bit of a bashing with the prevalence of Victorian penny-pie sellers hawking their noxious wares to the poor. The myth of Sweeney Todd didn't help, but then, nor did Fray Bentos. Today, however, our preference for the best ingredients, carefully cooked, has seen the pie come back triumphant.

Lunchtimes at the Windmill pub in Mayfair often see guests queuing for up to 20 minutes to sample one of its famous pies (steak

John Carey

Once merely an inedible casing, now an integral part of the joy of a pie, pastry comes in myriad incarnations, from suet pudding to egg-washed latticework

and mushroom is the bestseller; arrive by 12.15pm to avoid a wait). Among the office workers and shoppers seeking greater sustenance than Pret a Manger has to offer, there's a high proportion of tourists.

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'*The Wall Street Journal* did something about us a couple of weeks ago and we're very popular with the Japanese,' explains manager Mark Dawson. The consistency of the crisp, hot-water suet pastry and melting, meaty fillings also saw the Windmill's inclusion in Lonely Planet's *Ultimate Eat List* (2018) of the world's top 500 food experiences, he adds proudly.

Chefs vying to create The Great British Menu should take note. 'It's one of our national dishes, which is why I wanted to focus on the pie and elevate it again,' concludes Mr Franklin. 'I'm doing my little bit to bring it back.'

Holborn Dining Room, London WC1 (020-3747 8633; www.holborndiningroom.com)
Windmill Mayfair, London W1 (020-7491 8050; www.windmillmayfair.co.uk)



Best of British

Our nation's pie heritage has given rise to many regional specialities

○ **Cornwall** Stargazy pie, with pilchard heads protruding through the pastry, commemorates the heroic efforts of Tom Bawcock. This 16th-century resident of Mousehole set out to fish in severe winter storms, saving the villagers from starvation. Stargazy pie is eaten on the festival of Tom Bawcock's Eve (December 23). Other crucial elements are potato and hard-boiled egg

○ **Cheshire** A recipe for Cheshire pork-and-apple pie appears in one of the earliest mass-produced cookbooks, Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* (1747). It's a raised pie that can be eaten hot or cold

○ **Devon** A West Country curio, the Devonshire squab is a hot pie with mutton, not pigeon, and apples. It dates from the 1700s, when pigeon pie was the preserve of the rich. Perhaps the name was a joke on the part of the peasantry?

○ **Lancashire** Beef, potato and seasoning comprise the filling of the famous Lancashire pie, which is always sold hot

○ **Leicestershire** Melton Mowbray pork pies were first made to be carried by the huntsmen of the Shire packs. The meat was encased in a strong hot-water pastry, in order to withstand the rigours of jumping hedges. Yorkshire and Norfolk are also proud centres of pork-pie production, but their wares don't have the same protected status

○ **London** Now in decline, the East End's pie-and-mash shops have been serving beef pies (mutton was once common) with mash and liquor since the 19th century. Liquor is a parsley sauce made with the broth of stewed eels—never ask for the 'g-word' (gravy)

○ **Midlands** This pie-rich region also gave us the fidget pie. There are Shropshire, Huntingdon and Market Harborough variations, but the key ingredients are bacon and apples. It's served hot

○ **The West Midlands** A football-ground staple, chicken-balti pie, with chicken breast marinated in orange curry sauce, was created by Shire Foods in 1997 for Walsall and Aston Villa

○ **Scotland** As popular as fish and chips north of the border, Scotch pies, made of minced mutton or beef, are served hot—often at half-time during football matches. The raised rim leaves space on top of the pastry that can be filled with baked beans, gravy or mash

○ **Wales** The classic pie combination of chicken and leek, the Welsh national emblem, may date from the Middle Ages