



Cartier Bresson/Magnum

A Mood For Mocha

Café culture, argues **Lon Fleming**, is a challenge to the British pub

The culture of the café is generally assumed to have a distinctly continental mood. It is a central feature of a frequently mythologised European way of life. Similarly, the culture of the pub is a key feature of Britain's identity. But as we move towards further integration with the rest of Europe there is a new wave of interest and fascination with the café in Britain. The adoption of trendy cafés by high-profile sections of metropolitan youth and the development of the Dôme chain of cafés present a potential challenge to the status of pub culture in British ways of life.

This is not a new phenomenon. There have been a series of waves of imports of different kinds of café culture from Europe. These have included the interwar Central European settlements with

Turning Les Rosbifs

British cuisine, suggests **John Carr**, should no longer be the butt of Europe's jokes

'English cooking is old-fashioned because we like it that way. We do enjoy foreign dishes and admire Continental cooks, but when we cook the foreign dishes, the dishes, like the foreigners, become "naturalised English".' Written in 1954, Dorothy Hartley's classic statement in her book *Food in England* amply demonstrates how 'foreign food' has, in recent times in Britain, been the object of pity, derision or condescension, or all three. Foreigners either ate unspeakable things or 'messed about' with their victuals in an effort to disguise their unappetising or unwholesome nature. Never

Café Culture: A frequently mythologised way of life, as clear and as complex as pub culture

the emergence of cafés in places like Hampstead and Golders Green. And in the 50s, Italian imports from the Vespa to the coffee bar complete with gaggia inspired new associations and myths.

But what exactly is a café? Café culture in Britain could take in a range of places, from the transport 'caff', the venue of British working men, to tearooms, the domain of middle-class women, both of which are firmly closed at six in the evening. But the term is more often used to evoke quite different atmospheres and milieux. Café culture extends through the evening. It is the terrain of both sexes, different ages and different ethnic groups. It connotes a whole way of life both as clear and as complex as pub culture.

The café offers a number of different pleasures. While the clientele of many English and European cafés may focus on interior elements – the decor, the band, people at other tables – café culture is still structured through relations with the world outside. People read newspapers, write and talk. Conversation is more integral to café culture than to

that of the pub.

The café is outward looking. Its habitués are on display at the windows and on pavement terraces. When people sit outside, they sit in front of cafés. Pubs are more closed spaces and if people sit outside it is usually in the beer garden behind. The relations of looking are two-way in café culture, simply because the pavement, the street and the world outside are an integral part of the café scene.

Café culture is also distinguished from pub life by the way it relates to the division of the working day. It might appear to be linked more closely to consumption – witness the cafés in shopping centres and department stores which are still largely the terrain of women – but in Europe it is structured predominantly by waged working hours. Throughout France and Southern Europe where work starts early in the morning and resumes late in the afternoon, cafés are frequented early in the mornings when alcoholic drinks, as well as coffee, are served. The end of the working day is marked by the *promenade*, a stroll around the streets and

squares, looking and being looked at, itself culminating in a visit to the café.

British leisure continues to centre round the pub. While there is no pure, homogeneous pub culture, the recognition of, and easy integration into, the routines of pub life constitute two of its chief pleasures. This is especially intensified in the local pub with its regulars, but is available in some form to all pub users. In spite of attempts by brewers to diversify pub environments, they continue to offer homogeneity and familiarity whether it is the pub sign, the on-street entrance, the organisation of the bar and the usual (annoying) location of the women's lavatories furthest from the bars, or the notorious call for 'last orders'.

Gender organisation is a central feature of pub culture. Pubs are for the lads – of any age – and women alone in pubs are the object of the look of the male insiders. The pub is the traditional heart of masculine culture. Pub gardens and family rooms are peripheral. Entertainment is organised around the dartboard, the snooker table, the video machines and the juke

box. The pub has a sense of interiority, of closure. The focus is, of course, the bar, which is constructed as the heart of the community from *Coronation Street* through Albert Square to Archerland.

Whatever its limitations, the pub is spreading on the continent just as the culture of the café is sinking its roots deeper into British traditions. A standard version of the British pub is now available throughout the European Community, a portable home for British male working-class identity. And it's not just in the coastal resorts of Southern Spain, but increasingly in urban centres where it acts as a focus for the mobile labourers of the European market.

As work schedules in Britain become increasingly variable, with even larger sections of the workforce in part-time employment, café culture with its two-way looks, its engagement with the outside world and its more equal place for women and children, looks set to expand. It offers a new set of social relations and a diversity with which the pub is unable to compete. ●

mind the truth, feel the image. Rule Britannia. We even reigned supreme in the kitchen.

One wishes one could say that continental opinion of much of what, historically, has passed for the popular British kitchen was equally favourable. To the French we are '*Les Rosbifs*'. ('the roast beefs'), a phrase which rather aptly conjures up a horribly familiar picture of an unimaginative meat-obsessed nation. The phrase *à l'anglaise* still means 'plain cooked'.

1992 will not herald the sudden arrival of an amorphous, worrying, garlic-smelling 'Euro-grub'. Rather it will simply underline a trend which has been underway for some time: the opening up of the British hearts, minds, palates and kitchens to European (and wider) influences. But there are still important differences between British and European attitudes towards the preparation and consumption of food.

In Britain those who dream of themselves as chef-proprietors

in neat little restaurants are usually middle-class, looking forward to serving their own kind. A French bourgeois would no more entertain such a notion than jump in a wine lake. Becoming a second Sartre would be more likely to fulfill their fantasy.

In France the kitchen has been a traditional route for working-class or peasant kids to make it into the big time. Had they lived 100 or so miles south of London, Henry Cooper or Frank Bruno might just as easily have ended up as superchefs, rather than superboxers. But it is no longer 'cissy' for a British male to be interested in cooking. Many boys in working-class areas now even learn cooking at school. Unheard of not that long ago. And if anything, women chefs are more prominent in the UK than across the water.

The move towards a greater 'food consciousness' in the UK has been very much a part of the new consumerism and de-

cidely a middle-class led phenomenon. But cheap holidays abroad, the global nature of 'agribusiness', marketing on tv and immigration have helped spread the word up and down the social order. In a number of European countries, but most notably in France and Italy, a mass culture exists within which food is revered, even exalted: placed near the pinnacle of the hierarchy of pleasures. Eating is a more social activity. The painful formalism of some UK hostelrys simply horrifies and perplexes foreign visitors. In Italy you would be thought insane if you apologised for bringing your children to the restaurant.

Just as Dorothy Hartley has had her day over here so, over there, Britain is deservedly gaining a reputation for getting serious about food. We are no longer a culinary desert. Today the wine shelves of the average branch of Sainsburys would stand comparison with, indeed easily surpass, the great major-

ity of their continental counterparts. The access we have to wines from all over the globe is rarely repeated over the Channel. Your average Safeway would put to shame the fresh food sections of a good many European supermarkets.

The growth in the sales of, entries in, and interest surrounding the British editions of *The Good Food Guide* and the red *Michelin Guide* are further evidence of progress. A new British cuisine is emerging. Its style and presentation draw heavily on foreign, particularly French, influences. But the ingredients often have a traditional edge to them: ginger, cinnamon, quinces, spices and sound, rich stocks are some of its hallmarks. Our vegetables are once again becoming recognisable: being eaten fresh, young and crisp with a minimum of cooking. Britain's culinary renaissance may yet inject new life and pose new challenges to its complacent continental cousins. ●