

# Why could 'British restaurants' make a return?

REPORT | 11 Apr 2023

Communal kitchens funded by the British government during WWII are being used as a model for many in the food industry looking to help with the cost of living crisis. With millions facing food poverty, could the basic ideals of spaces that emphasise dignity and cross-class dining make a comeback?

## AUTHORS

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**LOCATIONS:**  
UNITED KINGDOM

**SECTORS:**  
EATING AND DRINKING  
RESTAURANTS AND TAKE-  
AWAYS



## EXPERTS

Maff Potts

Bryce Evans

## HIGHLIGHTS

- 01 Some restaurants are using a pay what you feel system to help alleviate food insecurity while offering an alternative to using food banks
- 02 There remains a prevalent sense of shame around seeking charity, particularly when it comes to food
- 03 The old British restaurants model tackled this by creating attractive, well-decorated spaces for people from all backgrounds

## DATA

- A fifth of the UK population is currently living below the poverty line
- 30 million people in the UK will be unable to afford what the public considers to be a decent standard of living by 2024
- In February 2023, food inflation rose to 17%, the highest level ever recorded, with households facing an £811 increase to their average annual spending

## SCOPE

It was during World War II that, to ensure people didn't starve, the British government funded communal kitchens. Originally called Community Feeding Centres and later rebranded as British Restaurants, over 2,000 of these kitchens provided hot meals, including a serving of meat, game, poultry, fish, eggs, or cheese, for the equivalent of £1.

What made 'British restaurants' stand out was not the name, the motive, or the funding. It was the fact that they were cross-class venues used both by poor people who couldn't afford meals and middle-class office clerks who came for the community. The restaurants were set up as welcoming spaces with music playing in the background and art on the walls. It would have been, says Bryce Evans, a professor of modern world history at Liverpool Hope University and food historian, most people's first and only experience of going out to a restaurant – and it was a pleasant one.[1]

Three-quarters of a century later, modern Britain is facing a different kind of crisis. Food prices have risen to the highest level in decades and a fifth of the country finds itself living below the poverty line. [2] According to studies, 30 million people in the UK will be unable to afford what the public considers to be a decent standard of living by 2024, and the New Economics Foundation, a left-leaning think tank, say rising prices and below-inflation increases in earnings will likely result in 43% of households lacking the resources to put food on the table, buy new clothes, or treat themselves and their families. Furthermore, almost 90% of single parents and 50% of workers with children would fall below a minimum income standard. [3]

Local communities are already seeing the impact of these stark and startling numbers. Many professional kitchens are welcoming local residents and providing food for free or through a 'pay what you feel' model, and increasingly, there are calls for the British restaurant concept to be brought back. At the forefront of these calls is Henry Dimbleby, the co-founder of the Leon restaurant chain, co-founder and director of the Sustainable Restaurant Association, and lead non-executive board member of the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs. "As a restaurateur, I knew how difficult it was to run decent restaurants and I thought the state would do a bad job of it," he told MPs on the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Committee during a meeting. "But the more I think about it, looking at the holiday activity on food programmes, we do have these extraordinary assets which are school kitchens. During the pandemic, my charity, Chefs in Schools, started cooking in them and delivering food to the community. In some communities, there is definitely a case for that." [4]

## PAY WHAT YOU FEEL

In the four weeks leading up to 19th February 2023, food inflation rose to 17.1%, the highest level ever recorded by Kantar, with households facing an £811 increase to their average annual spending for the same items. [5] Fraser McKeivitt, head of retail and consumer insight, Worldpanel Division, UK at Kantar noted on the agency's website: "Shoppers have been facing sustained price rises for some time now and this February marks a full year since monthly grocery inflation climbed above 4%. This is having a big impact on people's lives." He also noted that according to Kantar's latest research, grocery price inflation is the second most important financial issue for the public behind energy costs, with two-thirds of people concerned by food and drink prices, above public sector strikes and climate change. [6]

Where the government has failed, local communities and professional kitchens have stepped in to fill the gap. [The Real Junk Food](#) project in cities such as Birmingham and Brighton, as well as restaurants in local communities all around the country, are implementing a pay what you feel system to help community members. In east London, The Gleaners Cafe allows people to place an order and choose a payment scale. If payment is not possible, they can get the items free of charge. [7] Similarly, in Manchester, The Gherkin in Levenshulme, a popular vegetarian restaurant that serves homemade curries, roast dinners, and burgers, offered a pay what you feel or pay it forward option to customers last year, as well as a 'Kindness Kabinet' where people could donate anything from food to clothing. [8]

The food bank model is broken, says Evans, and that is why communities are having to step in to look after their own. "As a historian of food and feeding, I think history is going to look very unkindly on food bank Britain, which has really ballooned in the last 12 years of Tory government," he says. "But I can't help contrast that to the way it was in British restaurants, where there were paintings on the walls from the royal collection, the music was good, they'd put thought into the decoration, as well as cheap, nutritious food. Contrast that with the situation you have now, which is reversions of Victorian notions of the deserving poor. People feeling effectively defeated before they walk into a food bank or food pantry. British restaurants were specifically designed not to be shaming. They were specifically designed to be healthy." [1]



The Real Junk Food project's 'pay what you feel' system helps community members

Real Junk Food Brighton | Instagram (2022)

## SERVICE WITH DIGNITY

What set British restaurants apart from the many efforts at the time was the concept of dignity. It was, in fact, on the advice of Winston Churchill that the name was changed from 'Community Feeding Centres' to 'British restaurants'. The restaurants were also decorated and made to look like real restaurants before they were officially disbanded in 1947 when there were still 1,850 around the country. Churchill knew that people who were suffering didn't want to feel like they were taking charity.

This remains true today, with many people choosing to go hungry rather than ask for help. It is in keeping with this sentiment that, last year, Morrison's implemented an 'Ask for Henry' campaign, where people could go in and ask for Henry. Upon hearing that phrase, a staff member would provide them with a free meal, no questions asked. [9]

Maff Potts, the founder of [Camerados](#), a social movement that's been opening public living rooms in local communities since 2015, says he came upon the idea of public living rooms when he asked a simple question: What if Samaritans ran Starbucks? "What if there was somewhere on the high street where you went in when times were tough? And you knew people were cool?" he says. "What became apparent to us was that the public realm is divided into two places – places that sell you stuff and places that fix you. And we're interested in that third place, which is not selling you anything and not trying to fix you." [10]

They had little money, so Potts took over a garage in the middle of Sheffield that had been owned by an undertaker, got hold of 12 free sofas, dragged in an upright piano and kitted out the place with fairy lights. He also put a notice outside the door. "We didn't say tough times cafe," he says, because that would ensure nobody would come in. Instead, they put up a list of the top five David Bowie songs with a note saying "Come in and argue". They did. There are now 133 living rooms, not just across the UK, but also in Colorado in the US, Sierra Leone, Australia, and New Zealand. "What gets people is that it's not a church. It's not a charity. There's no fixing. There are no answers. There's just permission," says Potts. [10]



Camerados has been opening public living rooms in local communities since 2015

Real Junk Food Brighton | Instagram (2022)

## A REAL RESTAURANT

The idea of British restaurants was to move away from the idea of food banks and make coming to the restaurant a fun family experience instead. British restaurants looked and felt like real restaurants and people enjoyed going to them. "Today, most food banks will ask you for a referral from your GP or probation officer to prove how poor you are," says Evans. "Back in the day, it was a cash basis." [1]

The restaurants themselves were very well decorated. "In some of them in London, there were paintings on the wall from Buckingham Palace, multicoloured tables and chairs, specially commissioned murals by leading artists," says Evans. "There would have been music, gramophones, sometimes pianos, tablecloths, flowers, knives and forks – it was a very civilised dining experience." [1]

While the government has no intention of bringing British restaurants back, the general ethos has been embraced by people in the food business. It is why, for example, James Chiavarini, the current owner of Il Portico in Kensington, the oldest family restaurant in London, has opened up London's first and only free pizzeria for struggling families. Businesses such as Il Portico make no distinction between paid customers and people who are coming in for free food.





The Sussex Gleaning Network collects surplus harvest and turns it into meals

Sussex Gleaning Network (2023)

## INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

### COMMUNITY FIRST

With costs rising and incomes flatlining, people are struggling and looking to their communities for support. To meet the challenge, many local businesses have stepped up. In 2020 and 2021, 800,000 businesses were launched, with many focused on innovation and a very diverse group of founders. NatWest and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) published a joint report in July that estimated they could add £20 billion to the UK economy if they survive and scale. [11] Businesses that support people through this time and build community have continued to thrive. Social eating has many success stories, such as Wagamama with its long table dining, and IKEA, where people go just for the canteen, which [remains no-frills and reasonably priced](#), even in inflation times. People need not just food but also community.

### DIGNITY, NOT CHARITY

There are many models for helping people, but the national mood has definitely shifted away from asking people to prove their suffering in order to give them charity. British restaurants were essentially set up as a franchise system and there was a lot of commercial input into those spaces. If the model was to be brought back in some form, Evans says he'd want to run them as restaurants, but also put them on high streets. "A lot of these food banks and pantries are in cold backstreets – you feel ashamed to go into these places," he says. "By contrast, British restaurants were on the high street, they were ubiquitous. They were somewhere you wanted to go." [1]

### BEAT FOOD WASTE

Many businesses are combining the two problems of food waste and food poverty and solving them with simple solutions. Brighton has become one of the hubs of this effort. This UK City of Sanctuary, which is also the [UK's first city](#) to be awarded Gold Sustainable Food Status by Sustainable Food Places, an organisation that works to address food poverty, is home to many programmes that are countering hunger and food scarcity. [The Sussex Gleaning Network](#) collects surplus harvest from area farms and turns them into meals; [FareShare Sussex](#) provides its surplus to a local pub where a token donation buys a fresh meal; and the [Brighton & Hove Food Partnership](#) supports more than 130 sustainable community food projects.

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## SOURCES

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2. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (January 2023)
3. The Guardian (December 2022)
4. The Daily Mail (October 2022)
5. Sky News (February 2023)
6. Kantar (February 2023)
7. MyLondon (May 2022)
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9. The Mirror (December 2022)
10. Interview with Maff Potts conducted by the author
11. New Statesman (October 2022)



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