

When a food staple becomes a luxury

Warm-up question: What is your favorite comfort food and why do you think it holds that special place for you?

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Read aloud:

A MARTÍNEZ, HOST:

Who doesn't have a favorite **comfort food**? Maybe yours is chicken soup, mac and cheese or arroz con leche. Comfort foods are often cheap dishes with **humble origins**. But what happens when our staple foods become luxuries? Our colleagues over at The Indicator from Planet Money, Paddy Hirsch and Adrian Ma, take a look at fish and chips in the U.K.

PADDY HIRSCH, BYLINE: **By any measure**, fish and chips are an **integral** part of the British culinary landscape - 22% of Brits visit a fish and chip shop every week. And Brits spend roughly \$1.5 billion on fish and chips every year.

ADRIAN MA, BYLINE: And there are more than 10,000 fish and chip shops in the U.K. The vast majority are independently owned. And most are these takeout **joints** where you just kind of take your meal out wrapped up in paper.

HIRSCH: And they often have these cute names like The Frier Tuck or the Oh My Cod. Or in the case of the one around the corner from my mum's house in Bournemouth, Chips Ahoy! Perry Godfrey is the owner.

PERRY GODFREY: The shop's been a fish and chip shop for nearly 70 years now. When I took it over, it was very **rundown**. And we built it up in the last 22 years. And thankfully, we're very successful. And we keep going from day to day and keep improving, hopefully.

MA: Hopefully. Perry says the fish and chip business is coming under some intense pressure right now.

GODFREY: Economy at the moment - the prices have ranked up. Oil - just to open up per day, it cost me 50 pounds just in oil. Fish - fish has doubled in the last - over the last five, six years. Energy - of course, we know all about energy. Packaging is another cost.

MA: Yeah, and there are a lot of factors **to point a finger at** here. There's the war in Ukraine, which drove up the cost of vegetable oil and also the **fuel** to heat that

oil. And the U.K. government has also raised interest rates, which has translated into higher rents and more expensive loans. In some shops, the price on the menu board has risen to **eye-popping** levels - even as much as 20 bucks **a head**.

HIRSCH: And that's for a meal that's traditionally been a **staple** of the British diet, eaten by people on low incomes.

DUNCAN WELDON: If you go back 25, 30 years, you know, fish and chips were very, very cheap.

HIRSCH: Yeah, this is Duncan Weldon. He's the Britain economics writer at The Economist newspaper.

WELDON: If you compare the cost of fish and chips to something like the cheapest meals at a branch of McDonald's, they were very, very comparable in price 20 years ago. Whereas now, you're saying you're spending 2 1/2, three times as much on buying your lunch at a fish and chip shop than compared to a McDonald's. You know, that takes it from being a staple to being, **essentially**, a luxury item.

HIRSCH: This story of a staple becoming a luxury is not a new one. It happened to oysters in New York in the 1800s, to sushi in Japan, to caviar, brisket, lobster.

MA: Paddy, you just named, like, all the delicious foods. What's going on here?

HIRSCH: I'm just trying to make the point here that economics often drives long-term changes in diet and taste and that right now, the U.K. is going through a big change with this staple, fish and chips.

MA: Now, before people go out and start, like, panic buying fried fish and chips... This does not mean that the fish and chip shops are going to disappear, like, **overnight** altogether.

HIRSCH: No, no. The dish is still hugely popular in the U.K. And the restaurants are kind of **part of the fabric of the community** in a way that fast food chain joints are absolutely not. In Bournemouth, Perry Godfrey says the customers who visit his fish and chip shop certainly see things that way.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Comfort Food:** Food that provides nostalgic or sentimental value and is often characterized by high caloric nature, simple preparation.
2. **Humble Origins:** Having a modest or simple beginning.
3. **By Any Measure:** In every way, or as much as possible.
4. **Integral:** Necessary to make a whole complete; essential.
5. **Rundown:** In a state of disrepair; dilapidated.
6. **Point a Finger At:** To blame or accuse someone or something.
7. **Fuel:** A substance such as gas, oil, or electricity used to generate heat or energy
8. **Eye-Popping:** Astonishing or very surprising.
9. **(20 Bucks) a Head:** Per person.
10. **Staple:** A basic or essential food item.
11. **Essentially:** Basically; fundamentally.
12. **Overnight:** Suddenly or quickly.
13. **Part of the Fabric of the Community:** An essential and longstanding element within a community.

Comprehension Questions:

1. What food item is being discussed and what is its significance in British culture?
2. What are some of the economic pressures currently impacting the fish and chip industry in the U.K.?
3. How have the costs of running a fish and chip shop changed recently?
4. What has caused the price of fish and chips to rise significantly?
5. How does the current situation of fish and chips compare to its status in the past?

Discussion Questions:

1. How do economic factors transform everyday staple foods into luxury items?
2. Discuss the cultural importance of traditional foods like fish and chips in your country.
3. How can communities support local businesses facing economic challenges?
4. What are other examples of foods that have transitioned from being common to luxurious?
5. In what ways are traditional eateries part of the fabric of a community?

Additional Activity: Research and Presentation

- Research a traditional food from your country that has undergone a significant transformation in terms of preparation, cost, or cultural significance and present your findings.

Writing Task: Opinion Essay

- Write an essay on the impact of economic changes on traditional cuisines and local businesses.