

Petticoat Lane *Al Fresco*

For the last four centuries, Petticoat Lane Market formed a sort of membrane between the ‘City of London’ and the ‘East End’. The granite heart of global capitalism on one side of cast iron bollards, the red-brick muscle of Empire’s labourers on the other. Over the last seventy years, however, the gradual closure of the docks and the outsourcing of industry has seen the city’s muscle wither. The City on the other hand – along with its ‘cognitive labour’ – has metastasised through the old inner-East End. You can smell the coffee roasters and sourdough pizzerias chasing the cement and emulsion-paint-fumes up the road, from Whitechapel to Mile End.

Like an amoeba phagocytosing a smaller organism, The City has also enveloped Petticoat Lane, cocooned it with towers of glass and wipe-clean cladding, and is slowly digesting it. Over the course of the last fifteen years, the enzymatic action of re-valourised inner-city living has all but entirely broken down the old market, reconstituting greasy spoon cafes, luggage retailers and kinky underwear wholesalers into cocktail bars, gourmet ‘candy’ retailers and Chicago rib joints. The old market has not, however, been fully digested. At least not at the time of writing. For a start, there are still a handful of wholesalers in its vicinity. Peddling imported luminous batiks, patent leather heels, bongos and phone covers, the wholesalers are dependent on customers making the increasingly expensive trip into London’s congestion charge zone. In between the residues of the rag-trade is also Petticoat Lane’s food court; an assemblage of plastic patio chairs, polystyrene containers, a café, a restaurant and between five to eight food trucks. Each is open from around eleven in the morning to three in the afternoon, every day of the working week. More on these later. For now, the tradition of eating *al fresco* on Petticoat Lane is alive.

Prior to the sixteenth century the area around Petticoat Lane was little more than a

cluster of fields for grazing swine that had been driven along the path tracing the outer edge of the city wall. The path was not yet called Petticoat Lane but rather, more boringly (pun intended), Hog Lane. John Norden's 1593 map of London sketches trees on either side of Hog Lane, a feature noted in other accounts as a mixture of elms and hedgerows. It is entirely likely that these trees were the site of some of the earliest *al fresco* in the area; the shade and shelter that farmers and pig drovers sat to chew their portable meals. As the food historian John Burnett points out, for a large part of British history agricultural labourers 'ate out' more than any other group. While one of the few classes of Londoners to dine out regularly, these lunches were not, however, the most luxurious of meals. Rather they consisted of a daily rations of hard bread, ale, and in times of plenty, perhaps also an egg, bacon or cheese.

It is no coincidence that the hog-driving track and the porcine miasma that arose from nearby fields were downwind from the seat of power in London's west. That the East End is the lee of the prevailing westerlies would determine its fate for much of London's biography. At the start of the seventeenth century, following a fourfold increase in its population in less than a century, it was downwind around Hog Lane that London burst most emphatically through its erstwhile boundaries. Over the course of just one generation, London's eastern pastures were swamped with a sludge of mills, factories, furnaces and slums. Many of industrial London's labourers were migrants, from both elsewhere in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, but also Europe. Importantly, each would bring with them their own ways of being, doing and expressing, contributing to an explosion in the richness and complexity of the city's language and culture. Not a quarter of a mile from Petticoat Lane, Shakespeare and his players thrived on the new mix. Amongst the new industries blossoming in the area, were the spinning, weaving, cutting and sewing of silk; trades helmed by newly-arrived French speaking Protestant refugees fleeing the hostility augured by the Edict of Fontainebleau. While the refugees had

little choice but to synchronise and adapt to local customs and produce, they also contributed to the city's culture. Words such as 'refugee' itself, accompany 'ox-tail soup' the increased consumption of sauces with meat (gravy from *grané*), and salads as enduring contributions to the city's culture. It was also in the cook shops run by descendants of these refugees that the practice of frying 'chips' or *pomme frites*, likely entered London.

The 1667 map of London made by the Queen cartographer, John Ogilby, shows the remarkable square mileage of building that took place around Hog Lane over the course of another half a century of unprecedented population growth. *Not* depicted on Ogilby's Elizabethan map, however, was the daily efflorescence of stalls and traders that had started to appear on and around the street. To this day – despite their durability and importance to urban commerce – street markets are rarely depicted on maps. Known for hawking, shirts, skirts and undergarments, the presence of the market is detectable in the new moniker with which Ogilby marks seventeenth century Hog Lane.

It is a truism of the last half millennium of migration in the East End that each new cohort of arrivees moved directly in the businesses, cook houses and places of worship of their predecessors. Petticoat Lane is no different. By its pinnacle in the late nineteenth century, the market was flourishing under the patronage of another cohort of refugees. This time thousands of Jews fleeing pogroms unfurling between the Baltic and Black Seas. With British Empire at its geographic peak, and industry running at full steam, the street market that the refugees arrived into is captured regularly in the prose of Henry Mayhew. Therein Mayhew describes near enough two crowded miles of stalls and vendors centred around Middlesex Street (née Petticoat Lane; the Victorians renamed the street again, seemingly to censor public allusions to under-garments). Amongst the myriad of whale-bone corsets, lace, bristles, Havanah cigars,

Bengal cheroots and sealing wax, Mayhew also noted ‘costermongers’ hawking various foods from their barrows and crates. Offerings included bread (‘wheaten, standard wheaten and household’), ‘hot currant puddings’, ‘pickled cucumbers’ floating in barrels ‘like huge fat caterpillars’, a ginger beer fountain ‘made of mahogany’ with ‘brass pump handles’, various cuts of ‘pale, bloodless meat’ certified by Rabbis and oysters... uncertified by Rabbis. Other notable mentions include what was, for a few unsuccessful months in the mid 1860s, one of London’s earliest street vendors of ice cream. Behind the actual stalls of Petticoat Lane market, Mayhew also records several ‘cook shops’ dedicated to a special ‘eatable’ that ‘the Israelites delight in’: ‘fried fish’. The same cook shops, that is, that were doing French fries a century before.

Eating out at a cook house or a cook shop was a regular occurrence for Londoners. At least it was amongst the city’s labouring classes, if only for the fact that so few had kitchens or ovens of their own. As such, many cook houses would provide an oven to cook one’s own food, for a fee. Others specialised in their own dishes; frittered flanders, boiled trotters and tripe, or pies. Some of Petticoat Lane’s cook shops and costers were kosher and offered herring, salt beef and other north European staples. Others (presumably the one serving pigs trotters) were demonstratively Christian. This was not, however, a mosaic city with disparate ethnic groups existing side by side in parallel worlds. On the contrary, it was – to refresh the stalest of clichés – a genuine ‘melting pot’. That is to say, it was a space in which Londoners lives osmosed into one and others, and in which old identities folded in on themselves. Where and what you ate was important in establishing a relationship to the mix. In New York, Jews fleeing the pogroms embraced the trfye offered in Chinatown, in part to gently disaffiliate with aspects of ‘home’. On the otherside of the Atlantic, back in East London, Jewish Anarchists such as Rudolf Rocker, are recorded as making symbolic gestures of their taste for pork, marching past synagogues around Petticoat Lane with ham sandwiches aloft. According to Mayhew, even

those less committed to public performances of sacrilege might sometimes ‘creep into a Christian cook-shop, not being particular about eating *tryfe*.’

Showing equal disregard for Levitical alimentary regimes was one of Petticoat Lane’s most famous market stalls. Established in 1919 by the chubby Jewish Russian migrant, Itzko Brenner, Tubby Isaac’s Seafood was particularly renowned for vending an assortment of whelks, cockles, winkles and mussels (strictly prohibited in the Old Books), as well as the local speciality of jellied eels (an abomination for their lack of scales and fins). So well-known was the stall that, by the 1960s, the owner – by then it was a nephew of the original Tubby – became a member of the showbiz union ‘Equity’, such were the number of his prime-time television appearances. It was partly through such appearances that the 1960s saw Petticoat Lane’s eels increasingly tethered to the national mythology of the East End: a place of plucky Blitz survivors, egalitarian gangsters, fish wives and flirtatious starlets.

Locally, however, eels had already been part of everyday life for centuries. While the pre-Roman tribes of the south east eschewed the bounty of the sacred Thames and its estuary, the Mediterranean occupiers that arrived in 43AD quickly set about establishing a taste for all things piscine and molluscular. Eel, which were expertly farmed by Romans further south, accompanied herring, flounder and plaice in local diets for centuries that followed their arrival. They were still an important source of protein for the city over one and a half millennia later. Therein an ongoing demand necessitated that when they weren’t able to be fished locally, they were imported from the estuaries that feed into North and Baltic Seas. After the great fire of 1666, for instance, it was Dutch eel fishermen that purportedly kept the city fed with the catches that they brought across the North Sea to the smouldering city. For their efforts King James II granted the Dutch fishermen a special charter to sell direct to Londoners, bypassing the middle men of Billingsgate. As such, migrant entrepreneurs such as the Manzes, Cooke and Kelly

families, or later, Tubby Isaac's, found a ready-made customer base in the industrial East End. The consumption of jellied eels on, and around, Petticoat Lane would endure for nearly another century. Even following the first world war, when swathes of Britain's fishing fleets and shell-fish harvesters were lost to battle, Petticoat Lane's patrons dined on eel. And, in the wake of the Second World War – despite Tubby himself emigrating to New York as European fascism loomed – Petticoat Lane's eels continued to be guzzled *al fresco*; out of a porcelain bowl chilled by a damp morning, soused in vinegar and sprinkled with ribald conversation.

Resilient as it was to Nazi bombs, Petticoat Lane's seafood stand was ill-prepared for the radical demographic, economic and cultural shifts that were set in motion following the end of Second World War. Starting with the initial closure of docks in the 1950s, each decade that followed saw the demise of the area's import, export and manufacturing business along with, eventually, both the working-class communities and culture that upheld them. As old East Enders were relocated to new estates in Essex and Hertfordshire, many of the area's old seafood vendors, Tubby Isaac's aside, also moved with them, further down the Thames estuary. More fatal for long term future of the seafood trade, is a twist not unlike that which saw some nineteenth century Jewish Londoners turning against the alimentary doctrines of their ancestors: Once located outside the metropolitan area, the children of these re-located Eastenders would come to develop new suburban identities with culinary tastes constructed directly *against* the quivering piscine practices of their elders. Jellied eels were the first victim of the new culinary culture. Yet, disaffiliation with the parent culture is never total. As loyal sons and daughters, over the coming decades the new suburbanites would dutifully return to the East End with their parents at Christmas. The day would start visiting old graves in one of Tower Hamlet's verdant cemeteries before driving to Petticoat Lane and indulging their elderly mothers and fathers with a bowl of Tubby's jellied eels. In nearly every instance, the children

would stand back and watch, perturbed-but-tolerant of their parent's appetite for anguillan aspic. Unfortunately for Tubby Isaac's, even this trade died down in the new millennium. By 2013, faced with the soaring price of overfished eels, a new road layout prohibiting access to passing cab drivers, and the general demographic movement of its patrons out of London and into graves, it all proved too much. In June of that year, Paul Simpson, a direct descendent of the original Tubby, closed the seafood stand down.

Paradoxically, less than a stone's throw from the pitch where Tubby's Isaac's served its last cup of cockles, business is booming. The current success of main Petticoat Lane's main food court seems to lie in a combination of 'processes'. Some of these are epochal, spanning centuries and encompass an entire region's alimentary regime. Others taking place locally over little less than a decade. Firstly, the broader epochal trend. For every decade of the last half century (except the last), there has been a general increase in the number of Londoners eating out during their lunch break. Notably, the growth has been amidst the city's middle-class labourers. Changes in the socio-economic distribution of 'non-residential eating' start in the nineteenth century, as cities developed suburban residential zones for the new 'middling sort'. It was the relative distance between home and work, as well as perhaps the absence of their own cooks, that necessitated venues for the new suburbanites to dine away from home. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, The City's chop houses saw public dining opened up to an even wealthier class of Londoners, hitherto inclined to dine in private clubs or at home. War canteens, followed by fast food restaurants also helped to expand the general practice of lunching away from home. The picture changes, however, with the new millennium. At a national level, according to government agencies every year since 2001 has witnessed a steady decrease in eating out, especially eating out in restaurants. Partly attributable to a revolution in home cooking, it is also notable that the decrease accelerated in the immediate wake of the

financial crisis.

While they might be dining in restaurants less often, London's post-crisis middle classes are still 'eating out'. Their consumption patterns, however, have been affected by a number of trade-offs. Not least, serviettes and fine cutlery of the restaurant have been regularly swapped for the pavement and paper napkins of the 'food truck'. It is no coincidence that the 'street food revolution' currently unfolding across London, occurs in the wake of a financial crisis that has made both running and visiting a bricks-and-mortar restaurant increasingly difficult. But it is precisely this vogue amongst the 'squeezed middle' for *al fresco* lunches that saw Petticoat Lane's food court blossom. Notably between 2008 and 2009, as countless labourers from the nearby financial quarter and its ancillaries were either made redundant or had their expenses accounts cut, the number of food stalls at Petticoat Lane went from three, to eight in the space of three months. Resuscitated by financial crisis, Petticoat Lane's food court now gets up every morning, starting at around 10.00, with the arrival of the Tikka Truck (British Bengali owned). This is followed not long after by the arrival of a large transit van containing Tomo's Katsu Wrap tent (a Kurdish-Japanese joint enterprise). Soon after that come the falafel guys (Lebanese), the dumpling stall (Chinese) and the Thai Food van (Thai). And at some point in the late morning proceedings, where once were once were cook shops vending Huguenot pomme frit and kosher fried fish, a Greek-Cypriot-owned Fish and Chip shop heats up its oil, slices its potatoes and prepares fillets for frittering. By lunch time, the result is a constellation of aromas that make a mouth-watering testament to half a millennium of contributions and concessions made on Petticoat Lane.

While the food market is popular with the City's suited workers, as well as new media workers from the nearby creative hubs, it is also still popular with the East End's residual working-class residents who visit the market to buy cheap clothes, shoes and fabrics. How long it will continue, however, remains to be seen. With no heavy industry left in the East

End, and a state committed to stripping spatial capital from the city's poorest, the future of cheap and tasty calories in East London is not bright. All around the market, human-sized buildings are being knocked down and replaced with behemoths of high finance or luxury living. This alone – the displacement of the area's residual working-class user base – a threat to the viability of Petticoat Lane's food court. More significantly, however is the fact that the 'market' driven society that is enveloping the East End, appears to antipathetic to actual markets. Consider the fact that two of the largest markets near the financial quarter of The City – Spitalfields old fruit and veg market and Billingsgate Fish Market – closed in the immediate aftermath of 1986's Bing Bang, the moment that deregulation enabled global financial markets to supplant all other markets within the life of the national economy. More recently, a food market that recently 'popped up' in The City, ironically between two of its most deliciously named buildings (the Gherkin and The Cheese Grater) was first shut down, before being re-opened with changes dictated by local 'place makers'. Evidently, the unpredictable smells and noise of actual living and breathing markets create friction in the otherwise smooth flow of capital into and out of The City's bloodless veins.

The City's squeamishness does not, however, necessitate the end of *al fresco* dining around its perimeter. Petticoat Lane's environs offer many new opportunities to dine in the open air. Consider, if you fancy, lunch on the lush roof garden of refurbished pub. Gone are the pool tables and fruit machines. In comes the glazed rabbit leg, coco beans, *rooftop carrots* & pickled girolles (emphasis added). Or perhaps you might dine under street-lamp-light on the sidewalk outside a new high-end Greek restaurant; prices that would make a taverna-owner's-moustache curl. Half a mile further north, you can visit another cluster of food trucks and tents in the one car park in the area that is yet to be turned into a hotel. Therein you can sample a myriad of dishes that cater explicitly to a leisure-class preference for culinary performances of cultural mobility. To be sure, the novel dishes of today's hottest food trucks –

Taiwanese dumplings, Swedish barbecue and Aussie griddled prawns – stand some chance of becoming the everyday dishes of tomorrow’s London, as did fish and chips before them. But most of the new opportunities for experiencing gastronomy under London’s unreliable skies are quite the opposite of ‘everyday’. Rather, dining *al fresco* on and around Petticoat Lane is, becoming an exceptional, and increasingly exclusive event.

Of course, the East End changes. But for a long time, certain things also endured to make those changes possible. A pragmatic amenability to difference was, for instance, an enduring aspect of the local cultural DNA that grew out necessity living around the city’s port. As such, there was relatively little about the arrival of the Huguenots into the East End that would prohibit hospitality to the Jewish immigrants after them, nor later the success of Sylheti sailors that followed in their wake. While the sensoria of the city shifted, it was a set of underlying sensibilities, cultural practices, and institutions that made that East End’s ongoing dynamism possible. Eating *al fresco*, where the breeze brings a myriad of materials, people and cultures into contact with one and other, was a part of what made local sociality so resilient to such ongoing turbulence. The current shifts in the demography, culture and institutions of the East End, however, appear more permanent. The permanence of these changes lies, in part, because they accompany a significant shift in East End’s role within ways of living and making a living in the city. Failing another economic catastrophe, there is no necessity that the East End’s new residents need ever get along with one and other, sequestered as they are, on the 34th floor of a glass tower, behind the security of the concierge. We might only hope that, the next time they sidle up to the latest food truck to bite into a double-fried pulled-pork rice-bun, they spare a thought for the swine fattening fields and anarchic ham sandwiches that came before them.