

Rise of the gastropubs

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A decade or so ago, the terms organic, local, free-range and seasonal were not synonymous with the word pub.

Instead these establishments conjured up the image of lukewarm pies and deep fried chips, washed down with pints of beer and rounded off with a cigarette. How times have changed.

The rapid rise of the gastropub over the last 15 years has brought with it quality food, family-friendly environments and crisp, contemporary decor.

The recently published Good Food Guide 2009 now includes more gastropubs than ever before, including the Snooty Fox in Lowick in the north of Northamptonshire.

Out are the horse brasses and patterned carpets, and in is traditional food with a modern twist, complemented by impressive wine lists.

The gastropub – a British term for a public house that serves good quality food which is a step above pub grub – has also been at the forefront of the British food revival.

A sizeable sector of the public is now enthusiastic about fresh cuisine, promoted by a legion of high profile celebrity chefs.

Even Marks & Spencer has its own Gastropub range of ready meals, banking on the appeal of the concept.

The term, a combination of pub and gastronomy, was first coined in 1991, when David Eyre and Mike Belben opened a pub called The Eagle in Clerkenwell, London.

Since then, hundreds if not thousands of gastropubs have cropped up in cities, towns and villages, all trying to cater for a multiplicity of customer demands.

Diners now want venues and food that have it all: service, quality, freshness, local origin, ethics, traditional food, contemporary dishes, child friendliness, value for money, nice decor, casual dress, smart dress and more.

Some people are reserving judgment on the phenomenon.

The Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) may seem like a candidate for the anti-gastropub brigade, but Northampton member Paul Barton said they were keeping an open mind.

"As long as the pub retains real ale and traditional elements CAMRA is all for diversification into restaurant quality food.

You get a much broader range of flavours from beer than you can from wine."

Foods consultant Mr Banks added that most gastropubs made an effort to retain several draught beers.

Hello Twist Goodbye Smoke

The crackdown on drink-driving had a huge impact on pubs, particularly in rural areas. No longer was it acceptable to drive to the pub, have a skinfull, then drive home.

Over the last two decades, pubs have become more of a social affair for friends and families, rather than places for a working man to go for a drink with his colleagues.

Charles Banks, of Woodford Halse-based consultancy thefoodpeople said the move from drinks and snacks to quality food had helped many pubs to survive.

"Eating out has rapidly increased in the last five to 10 years and people go out more to eat than go out to drink.

"People started to see there was a gap between pubs with Brake Brothers microwave lasagne and restaurant food.

"Historically, on a special occasion like a birthday, people would have a dinner party, but now they feel it is easier to go out."

Another driving force for better food in pubs has been the ability for landlords to lead the way.

Chris Wright, the commercial director for McManus Pubs, which owns The Swan at Lamport and The Red Lion at Bradfield-on-the-Green, said creating a nice, family friendly atmosphere was now the only way to sustain a small village pub.

He added: "The people with tenancies (at brewery-owned country pubs] are driving food.

The beer is tied to the brewery, so they can't change it, and they realised they can make more money from food, so they have been developing it."

The food is best described as "traditional with a modern twist", with rustic British dishes spiced up with an Asian or Mediterranean influence.

Mr Banks explained: "To a large degree, pubs take their produce from local suppliers.

It is rustic, honest and simple.

Fish and chips may still be on the menu, but it will be sustainable fish, with a named variety of potato and side of mushy peas with mint in it.

"Or they may have burgers on the menu, but it may be venison with triple cut chips.

"Things also tend to migrate from the top down.

A few years ago, people wouldn't have monkfish, apart from at top class restaurants, and now it is served in gastropubs.

There is a little bit of pushing things further, such as scallops which might have an Asian dressing."

One Northamptonshire pub which serves scallops and Royal bream (rather than monkfish) is Cromwell Cottage in Kislingbury, which re-opened in May after a massive revamp to transform the former chain eaterie.

Landlord Philip Daley said customer demand was primarily driving up pub food standards.

He said: "People want to know what they are eating.

They want organic and free range. If it puts 20p on the price, customers don't mind.

We do wholesome dishes, as hearty dishes is what it is going back to.

We do gammon and egg, but with potato and chive mash."

Beer & Victuals

Ambience is just as important as food when it comes to a gastropub.

Chunky wooden furniture, white walls and a minimalist feel are the staple decor of gastropubs.

Philip Daley of Cromwell Cottage said: "What is going to get you out on a Tuesday night is to sit with a nice glass of wine, in front of the fire, which is what we offer. We are not trying to be a restaurant, we are trying to be the hub of the village."

It is this relaxed atmosphere and lack of formality, combined with tasty, value food, which is attracting thousands of customers to gastropubs.

The all-inclusive experience is appealing to a wider audience than restaurants, which can be seen as elitist, according to food consultant Charles Banks.

"People don't feel intimidated in gastropubs. They are family friendly and you can order a beer."

Chris Wright, of McManus Taverns, agreed: "We are trying to entice the drinker and people coming for a three course meal; you can't push it too far in one direction."

It is not only diners being drawn in.

Up-and-coming chefs are choosing to get established in a pub kitchen, with a customer base and money from the bar to keep the bank manager happy.

Television favourites Jamie Oliver and Gordon Ramsey – who owns a number of pubs – are trying to reach a mass audience and make tasty, healthy, quality food for all.

"It used to be Beefeater-style restaurants, but people's tastes have changed, due to celebrity chefs," said Mr Wright.

And he said the credit crunch was changing habits: "The same number of people are coming out, but there has been a reduced spend per head in the last couple of months.

"They will change from an expensive wine to the house wine and from a fillet steak to a ribeye."