

Open or wrapped...

... or elegantly served by a Michelin-starred chef?
How fish and chips got hip
by Emily Miles

Plus the
10
best chippies
in Britain

Our parents' generation knew where they stood with fast food.

In the Seventies, pizzas came from McCain and arrived cellophane-wrapped from the supermarket. You could have any flavour you liked, provided it was cheese and tomato or ham and mushroom — a very poor relation to anything they might have served on the Amalfi Coast. Then gourmet cooking for the masses arrived: wood-fired pizzas served fresh from ceramic ovens and using snazzy new ingredients like tiger prawns, dill and bocconcini. Pizza Express boomed — with its wooden floors, light jazz and wine list, it became the default middle-class lunch spot. By the Nineties, sausages and burgers had had a similar makeover, heralding popular restaurants like Gourmet Burger Kitchen and Mother Mash. They sold high-quality, often organic, products and encouraged customers to eat in, not take away. New York aesthetics, stylish staff and on-trend menus made British comfort food unapologetically cool.

But somewhere within this revolution, our national dish, fish and chips — invented 150 years ago — got left behind. "People had got complacent with fish and chips, doing things in a certain way just because that's how they've always

been done: using frozen fish; leaving chips sat in potassium to stop them oxidising; serving dyed mushy peas and using dirty oil," reckons Nick Crossley, founder of next-generation London chippy Kerbisher & Malt. "It's not all rubbish; it's just not done well."

Crossley is on a mission to save fish and chips. He's not alone. New venues such as The Smokehouse in Folkestone (a project from Gordon Ramsay protégé Mark Sargeant, ex-head chef at Claridges) and Poppies of Spitalfields in London, (which sources fish daily from Billingsgate Market) serve up a formula that's right for 2011: sustainably sourced, delicious food, presented in sleek modern venues.

"It's about doing food well in a nice environment and not trying to be too fancy," says Crossley. "It's about letting the ingredients speak for themselves." Mark Sargeant agrees: "We're right next to Folkestone Trawlers and they bring in fish that's as good as it gets. We're also surrounded by amazing farms with fantastic produce."

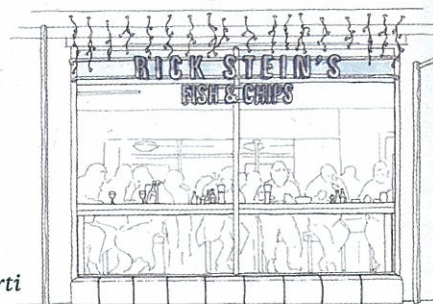
Sounds good, doesn't it? Inspired by fish and chips' ongoing makeover, *Esquire* scoured the country to find the best new gourmet eateries, as well as more traditional ones that have been getting the dish right for years. Why? Just for the halibut, of course.

PHOTOGRAPHY
Dan Burn-Forti

ILLUSTRATIONS
Emma Kelly

The 5 best contemporary chippies in Britain

RICK STEIN'S FISH & CHIPS, CORNWALL Discovery Quay, Falmouth



"There's no reason why fish and chips can't be loved by everyone," says Rick Stein. We say: if everyone got to eat at Stein's, this would doubtless be the case. Having put the Cornish town of Padstow firmly on the foodie map with his cookery schools, restaurants, delicatessens, pubs and patisseries, the celebrity chef's move into fish and chips — both at the excellent Padstow original and this new Falmouth outpost, right on the quay — was a natural one. Stein has held a soft spot for this pretty coastal town ever since he first visited in the Seventies — it was here he got the inspiration for his original Seafood Restaurant. Asked what makes his fish and chips so good, Stein says: "We make our own chips, we fry everything in beef dripping and we use fillets of large cod from Iceland [the country, not the frozen-food store, obviously]." And it's the dripping that really makes the difference, creating a gnarled, crisp, full-flavoured batter shell in which to steam the fresh local hake, monkfish and John Dory. If fried's not your thing, then try fish roasted in the barbecue oven. If the weather's squally, grab a seat at the window in the glass-fronted dining area; alternatively munch on fish and chips wandering along the quay. (+44 1841 532 700 rickstein.com)

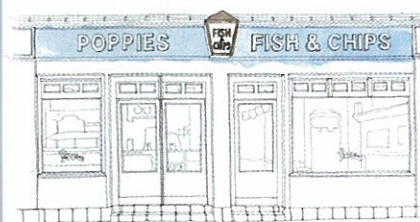
GEALES, LONDON 2 Farmer Street, London



When Geales started frying fish in 1939, Notting Hill was a very different place: less chichi mews houses and millionaires, more slum landlords and salty characters. It catered for the working classes, doing what fish and chips does best — providing a hot, filling, sustaining meal. Geales in 2011 is significantly smarter, with white tablecloths, large glasses of buttery Chablis and plenty of bourgeois menu additions (tempura soft-shell crab, lobster spaghetti, etc) confirming its metamorphosis from chippy to fish restaurant. What it cooks is excellent, with the haddock best enjoyed at an outdoor table, watching the well-groomed world walk by. (+44 20 7727 7528 geales.com)

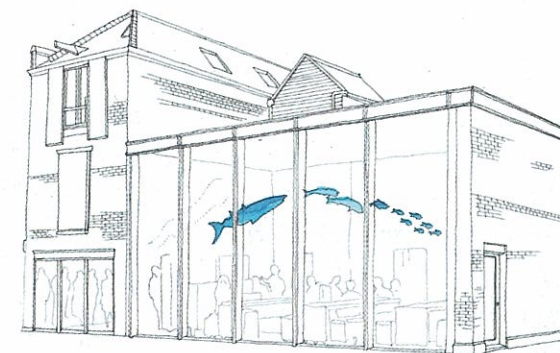
POPPIES OF SPITALFIELDS, LONDON 6-8 Hanbury Street, London

From its Formica-topped tables and fish bar to the restored AMI jukebox, you'd be forgiven for mistaking Poppies for a Fifties-style American diner. Look a little closer though, and the Second World War memorabilia, London Underground nameplates and Vera Lynn-esque soundtrack place it firmly in Old Blighty. What you might not realise — but for the high proportion of Hoxton haircuts — is that Poppies is brand-new, having opened its doors in February. On our visit (mid-afternoon on a Tuesday), it was doing a roaring trade, with the vintage-print-apron-clad staff happily bantering as they battered cod. Pop (aka 68-year-old Pat Newland, the brains behind this operation, who's been



serving East End fish and chips his whole life), was tucking into a plate of buttered bread and freshly cooked haddock — clearly happy to endorse his product. And Poppies offers a wide-ranging choice, including sole, skate and scampi, on the list of produce sourced daily from Billingsgate (which has the largest selection of fish of any UK inland market), as well as traditional alternatives such as saveloys and battered sausage. The mushy peas are delicious (though not minted), and Poppies' pickled onions are damned tasty with pretty much anything fried. It also has a licence: we rate Pale Ale by craft brewers Meantime. (poppiesfishandchips.co.uk +44 20 7247 0892)

THE SMOKEHOUSE, KENT 1-3 Back Street, Folkestone



Gordon Ramsay's former protégé Mark Sargeant is very excited. He has just been on a fact-finding mission to Rick Stein's in Cornwall to glean insider knowledge from a fish and chip master. "I wasn't sure about the beef dripping, but it makes a difference; it's brilliant," Sargeant says. And it's not just batter the Michelin-starred chef's enthusing about. On the brink of opening two destination Folkestone eateries, The Smokehouse fish and chip shop and nearby Rocksalt Restaurant, Sargeant cannot wait to get cracking. "I have never seen such quality in my life," he says of the fish market that's a mere stroll from Rocksalt's front door. "And there are acres of undeveloped seafront 50 minutes from London. I completely get it!" Sargeant's restaurants will be to Folkestone what Stein was to Padstow — property speculators take note. The Smokehouse, he tells *Esquire*, is going to be "kitsch but cool at the same time", serving homemade pickled quails eggs, mushy peas, "clever" catch-of-the-day recipes such as *fritto misto* — as well as all the classic chippy staples. Kentish cider and Meantime beer will both be on offer, too. As we went to press, The Smokehouse hadn't yet officially launched — but from what *Esquire*'s seen, we can take Mark at his word: "This will be stunning food in a stunning location where people can afford to eat." (thesmokehousefolkestone.co.uk)



KERBISHER & MALT, LONDON 164 Shepherds Bush Road, London

"Are we out of chips?" shouts front of house to the chef. It's 9pm on a Friday night in May, just four days into Kerbisher & Malt's operation. Heart-sinking words. "Ten minutes!" comes back the reply. Thanks to fine-dining expert and ex-Oxo Tower chef Saul Reuben and his brother-in-law Nick Crossley, Kerbisher & Malt is fish and chips done properly. As we sit at scrubbed wooden tables, our order of freshly battered cod is brought over: it's flaky, pearly white and perfectly cooked. The lemon mayonnaise is unctuously, gloopily delicious (like the tartare and regular mayonnaise, it's homemade). The chips taste earthily of potato, managing to be both crunchy and fluffy (no wonder there's a rush on). The menu has something for everyone: crushed potato salad for your girlfriend; chip butties for students and fish served in matzo — a Jewish flatbread — for those in search of something a bit different. One thing there isn't though, is seconds — it's a sell out performance. (+44 20 3556 0228 kerbisher.co.uk)

