

# Cancel the croissant, we should all be having a full English

The humble greasy spoon café is in danger of dying out, but top chefs want to protect the institution



When even The Wolseley, the grand London restaurant famed for its full English fry-up, served with toast on a rack and a silver-plated tea pot, is in danger of shutting up shop, it's time to worry. The old-fashioned breakfast has fallen out of favour and might never recover.

My order is black pudding, two sausages, a fried egg, grilled tomatoes, beans and plenty of toast. Brown sauce, not ketchup. Perhaps controversially, no bacon. For you it'll be something different, but that's the inherent beauty of the fry-up: it is endlessly personalisable. And a British meal with truly regional variance – Lorne sausage and tattie scones in Scotland; cockles and laver bread in Wales; soda and potato bread in the Ulster fry; and several variants within.

It is no secret that pubs are in decline; around 2,500 were lost in 2020. But greasy spoons, the humble, spiritual home of the fry-up, face similar oblivion.

The reasons are manifold. Customers want healthier breakfasts featuring avocados and porridge. Fewer people have the sorts of jobs where a highly calorific breakfast is necessary. Many 20th century greasy spoons were opened by first-generation immigrants, whose children often seek other careers. Perhaps Wetherspoon, which has undercut the majority of caffs with its cheap breakfasts, is to blame?

Three of my favourite greasy spoons (I live in London) are, Mario's in Kentish Town, E Pellici in Bethnal Green and Regency Cafe in Pimlico: all were

founded by Italians, in E Pellici's case in 1900 (remarkably it's still in the same family). My go-to order there, a black pudding and egg ciabatta, is a nod to its roots.

These have survived for reasons beyond their breakfasts, good though they are. Mario's has excellent British lunches; E Pellici's atmosphere has put it firmly on the hipster radar; Regency Cafe has been used in a number of films, most recently Rocketman, making it a tourist attraction.

Other cafes have modernised to stay current. Austin Yardley runs Terry's Cafe near Borough Market, which his father opened in 1982. Yardley balks at the term "greasy spoon", which he believes once had negative connotations, although he admits it is now used nostalgically.

"Terry's was traditionally a 'working man's cafe', more akin to a French roadside bistro, serving home-cooked food at an affordable rate," says Yardley. Today the menu focuses on fry-ups using high-quality ingredients (and coming in at around £10) and the cafe is a hit on Instagram. Healthier options like fruit salads are available, while high-end Monmouth coffee is served – a far cry from the traditional Nescafe.

Similarly in Cardiff, the recently opened Wyndham Cafeteria, which took over the site of a longstanding Italian-founded greasy spoon, is producing classic Welsh breakfasts with quality locally sourced ingredients.

"The English breakfast is definitely not going anywhere," says Yardley, whose success has seen him take over another fabled site in Borough Market, Maria's Market Cafe.

That may be true (witness the £20 Hawksmoor breakfast) - and it's hard to imagine life in the capital without The Wolseley, which may serve a fry-up but could never really be called a greasy spoon. However in my neighbourhood, a modern brunch spot serving named-farm sausages and £3 coffees sits next to a very old-school caff. No prize for guessing which has queues and which is empty.

*In the spirit of this nostalgia, we asked some of Britain's top chefs for their favourite greasy spoons and orders, and here's what they had to say...*



**Tommy Banks**  
**Chef-patron of The Black Swan at Oldstead and Roots, York**

“Who doesn't love an English Breakfast? Personally, I don't understand why tomatoes are on

there, as they're only in season in the UK a few weeks a year. I always sack them off. You've got to go for the eggs and meat first, the tomatoes and mushrooms are a bit of an afterthought. I like scrambled eggs, or fried if they're crispy. I prefer streaky to back bacon, because it's fattier and juicier. A nice bit of black pudding, a good sausage... maybe tomatoes if it's summer.”

**Roberta Hall McCarron**  
**Chef and owner of The Little Chartroom and Eleanore, Edinburgh**

“The best fry-ups for me are ones with no frills but sheer indulgence. It has to be a lot of food for a little money, otherwise it's not really a fry up, is it? One of my favourite breakfasts is The Roseleaf in Edinburgh. I always go for the 'big yin' which is sausages, black pudding, haggis, bacon, beans, tomato, egg and a tattie scone.”

**James Cochran**  
**Chef-proprietor of 12:51, London**

“Whether it's a hangover cure or a boozy brunch this place has got it! My go-to is always the 'Bad man milk' cocktail which consists of their house-infused coffee whisky, maple syrup and milk. For food it's always the "Posh pig", a mashup of crispy bacon, black pudding, beetroot-hash brown, manchego, spinach, chorizo jam all served up in a muffin with a good dollop of Sriracha on the side.”

## **Amy Elles**

### **Chef-patron of The Harbour Cafe, Fife**

“My love of the greasy spoon was born at The Wilton Cafe in Victoria, which was a few doors down from my dad’s hair salon. My sister and I would go to work with him on Saturdays from a young age, and we always went to the Wilton. I have fond memories of toasted cheese and tomato sandwiches in perfect squares. There was noise, banter and big characters. As I grew older it would be bubble, tomato, sausage and a poached egg. Pure heaven.

“Living in Scotland I do miss bubble, you don’t find it here, but I’ve become partial to a tattie scone. These days my order would be sausage, fresh tomato, tattie scone, lorne sausage and poached eggs. Not traditional but you have to make it how you like it.”



A Full Scottish breakfast

## **Tommy Heaney**

### **Chef-patron of Heaneys, Cardiff**

“My da used to take us to a place called Benny’s Cafe in Belfast for a traditional Irish breakfast – it was a real treat to go out for breakfast back then. We’d always get the full Irish:

sausage, black pudding, white pudding, egg, fried soda bread and fried potato bread – you just can’t beat it. I was partial to a soda bread sandwich too.”

## **Shaun Rankin**

### **Chef-patron of Shaun Rankin at Grantley Hall, Yorkshire**

“My favourite is Oliver’s Pantry in Ripon, a friendly, family-run spot where the produce is top quality, free range and from local farms. I go for a full fry including their excellent handmade sausages, bacon, poached eggs and hash browns. A hearty fry-up sets you up for the day. But a local cafe isn’t just for breakfast. These places fuel us all day long, having done brunch before it was trendy. At Oliver’s I’ll go for a classic Club sandwich with a side of fries.”

## **Jack Stein**

### **Chef-director of Rick Stein Restaurants**

“Ben’s Crib Box Café in Padstow is the go-to for all-day breakfast and you’ll see all types: fishermen after work, Padstow locals and weekenders. Proper, quality, local ingredients (from black pudding to sausages) and decent coffee. It’s not a greasy spoon but an all-day cafe, and good value. I’ll always order the same: Ben’s full English, but beans on the side please.”

## **Tom Cenci**

### **Head chef of 26 Grains and Stoney Street, London**

“I used to go to Benjy’s in Earls Court to cure my hangovers, but sadly it’s not there anymore. They used to do a deal called ‘the big builder’ which was a massive English breakfast with chips and unlimited tea for about £4 – that’s probably why they went out of business. Something about the combination of a proper fry-up warms the heart. As a chef, sometimes you just need that nostalgia rather than eating refined food all the time.”

## **Emilia Strazzanti**

### **Chef and co-founder of Strazzanti**

“You can’t beat a sausage and fried egg (semi-runny) sandwich with Daddies brown sauce on sliced white bread, all the things you know you shouldn’t have at home. You also have a mug of hot tea with half a sugar. All the trappings of a good greasy spoon.”

## **Alex Bond**

### **Chef-owner of Alchemilla, Nottingham**

“I love a greasy spoon. It has to be the full English with everything, but grilled tomatoes rather than tinned, I can’t stand those. I always have brown sauce for the sausages and red sauce for the bacon on the opposite sides of the plate. Thick-cut toasted white bread, and a mug of tea.”

## **Ferdinand ‘Budgie’ Montoya**

### **Founder and head chef of Sarap Bistro and Sarap BAon, London**

“I love convenience, so breakfast in between bread is my usual order, whether it be a Turkish breakfast bap (sucuk, fried eggs and ketchup) from my local spot Roca on Grange Road in Bermondsey, or a bacon, sausage and egg roll from Express Café in Brixton. Oh, and hash browns, I’m a sucker for a hash brown or two.”

## **Ruth Hansom**

### **Head chef of the Princess of Shoreditch, London**

“Norman’s Cafe in Tufnell Park has to be my absolute favourite. It’s everything you want a greasy spoon to be: plastic chairs welded to the floor, red and white checked curtains and a plethora of essential condiments already on the table. The food is just as laid back but so good, and the service is always warm and relaxed. I usually get a bacon roll with a side of bubble and squeak and house gravy. If I’m really hungry their set breakfast is where it’s at. If we go later in the day I’m tempted by the pie and mash or the fish bits with tartar.”