

Brit export finds place in London hearts

Pat Currie, Special to QMI Agency

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MIKE HENSEN The London Free Press John Arp of Kipp's Lane Fish and Chips has been serving Londoners for 38 years from their northeast London location.

That humble working-class meal, fish and chips, probably ranks as the greatest single export of British cuisine, following the Union Jack around the globe over the past 150 years.

"It was always, always a favourite," says British-born Stan Lucas, who spent seven years as ship's cook aboard Shell tankers plying the lanes between the Persian Gulf and ports in Britain.

"The crew were of all nationalities but they were all crazy for fish and chips."

Fish and chips crosses all class lines. Former RAF pilot Steve Haley, Petrolia-born but schooled in England, recalls "walking along the Embankment in London in the late 1930s at 3 a.m. and seeing an elegantly dressed to in white tie and tails and his lady in her gown leaning on the balustrade (ornamental railing) and eating fish and

chips out of a newspaper."

No wonder fish and chips was one of the few foods not rationed in Britain during the Second World War.

And no wonder there are something like 8,500 "chippy" shops in the British Isles, where's there's a huge annual competition to name the best 10 shops of the year.

Fish and chips is doing just fine in London, Ont.

London has a lot of restaurants and bars where tasty fish and chips are made and sold. But loyal customers still flock to the small, sturdy independent "chippies" that have survived the flood of fast-food and multinational franchise chains that now dominate the scene.

Many of the local independents still carry the names of a founding family, but almost all have gone through a succession of owners over the years.

British as its heritage might be, fish and chips in London, Ont., has three staunch defenders in an immigrant from Holland, another from Portugal and a third from Albania.

"Fish and chips is not fast food," states Luan Jonuzi, the man from Albania, who bought Irene's Fish and Chips 1 years ago and changed its name to Irene's Seafood Restaurant to reflect a broader menu.

At least twice a week Jonuzi serves up his heritage trademark Albanian bean soup - he won't let anyone else make it, not even his Filipino cook, Art - and steak and chicken dishes are on the menu.

But fish and chips remains the meal that attracts a loyal following to the 35-seat eatery at 315 Wellington Rd. Five years ago, it was Hilton's Coffee Shop, then Irene's Snack Bar. Irene sold it in 1966 to Gus and Maria Tzaris turned it into a "chipper" and eventually sold it to Jonuzi.

"It was a good business," says Gus.

Jonuzi's trademark meal is a huge serving of fish (halibut is the favourite) and light, crispy french-fried potatoes with a side of coleslaw, for \$7.20.

"It's healthy, it's nutritious and kids like it," says Jonuzi.

Gus is a bigger hero to Jonuzi even than the world-famed Argentinian soccer player Diego Maradona. On the wall hangs a photograph showing a much-younger Luan Jonuzi exchanging grins with Maradona.

"I was on an all-star team that played a game against Maradona and his brother in Toronto," Jonuzi explains.

Despite a lack of parking, Jonuzi says about 80% of his customers are regulars. "When they have to take a bus or a car to come to Irene's and they keep coming back, then we must be doing something good," he says.

The fish and chips champion from Portugal is Amarino Pinheiro, who in 1998 bought what used to be Jackie's Lunch Bar 50 years ago, then the International Restaurant. Pinheiro turned it into International Fish and Chips, pouring \$85,000 into turning the somewhat shop-worn beanery into a spotless and homey eating place seating 50. He has 20 parking spaces out back.

"Business is fantastic. There have been some ups and downs but overall it is up maybe 60% from the day we opened.

"My accountant says, 'I don't know what you're doing, but it's something good', " Pinheiro says.

In his salad days, Pinheiro didn't exactly rub elbows with celebrities, but he did get to pass the buns to showbiz luminaries Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and Charlton Heston and Dr. Christiaan Barnard, who performed the world's first successful human heart transplant in South Africa in 1967.

That was when Pinheiro was a waiter at the renowned Dorchester Hotel and Hotel May Fair in the British capital.

Because of his background in such fab beaneries, Pinheiro came to London, Ont., in 1974, one of a group of seven European waiters brought in to open a new French restaurant at Wellington and York streets (now the site of the Yuk Yuk's comedy club).

Like many other "chippies," Pinheiro has his own recipe for the batter in which he fries his fish. You can ask him what the ingredients are, but don't expect an answer.

Whatever they are, loyal customers from all parts of the city and nearby communities such as Dorchester and Lucan like the results and keep coming back.

"Fridays are always busy and on Good Friday it's just crazy. Last Good Friday, by 4 p.m. we had sold 280 pieces of fish," Pinheiro says.

Brenda Phillips still runs the shop at Olde London Fish and Chips, the store she co-founded 15 years ago "in a place that had nothing, just bare walls and a floor," in a strip mall at 561 Southdale Rd. She's now the sole owner (no pun intended).

"It wasn't easy starting out, with all the competition," she recalls.

But Phillips comes from a family of "chippies" and - armed with the family's secret recipe for batter - has built a "great, great business" in South London.

"My dad opened a fish and chips business in Windsor in 1955. He was the one who developed the secret family recipe for a nice, light, crispy non-greasy batter," she says.

Using their own personal minor variations of the magic mix, Phillips, two sisters, a brother and two nephews have all gone on to own their own fish and chips shops.

"Our clientele (in London) is mostly over 50, but we're starting to attract more young people," Phillips says.

To celebrate the Olde London's 15th anniversary, she recently ran a \$5 haddock dinner special.

"I'm very happy," she says.

Jason Calcutt, a cheery chappy with a breath of Britain in his speech, who manages Walker's Restaurant at 223 Wellington St., also learned the trade in a family fish and chips shop in the British south coast town of Clacton-on-Sea before he came to Canada.

"I started out in my uncle's shop, so I know the trade. I grew up in it," says Calcutt, who looks 20 years younger than his 36 years.

Calcutt started as a cook at Walker's six years ago when the little restaurant - a fixture in London going back 66 years - was bought by Robert Pouliot.

Pouliot also owns Robbie Walker's Fish and Chips, a take-out shop in Sherwood Forest Mall, and is opening Hey Dayz, a new-look spot with a special emphasis on poutines but still selling fish and chips, on Pall Mall St. just west of Richmond St.

The original Walker's began life as the Bobbysox, a teen hangout, in 1944. For years it was Walker's Restaurant. Under Poulin's ownership, it has been given a changed look - the motif is 1950s - and a slightly reduced menu "because peoples' palates change," Calcutt says.

"I was the guy who introduced bangers and mash here," he adds, with a nod to Horace Rumpole's favourite dish fried sausages and mashed potatoes. "It's beautiful, with garlic mashed potatoes. Real mashed potatoes."

Walker's remains one of the most popular fish and chips shops in the city, within walking distance of the city core and offering regular weekday specials.

"I love it here," says Calcutt.

"On Tuesday we have all-you-can-eat pollock dinner for \$6.55. We get a lineup down the block.

"On Wednesday, we have a \$20 dinner-for-four special and on Thursday, seniors get 10% off or a pollock dinner for \$4.95.

"We have one regular, an elderly lady, who puts away nine pieces of fish," he says.

Calcutt says the fish is always fresh and the batter is a house secret.

"All my kitchen staff is bonded," he jokes.

London's codfather is John Arp, who's been dishing up fresh fish and chips and other seafood at his tiny Kipp's Lane Fish and Chips shop for 38 years.

"Some of my customers have been with me for the whole 38 years. Proves I must be doing something right," says Arp.

Right enough that in 1982 The London Free Press's food columnists declared Arp's fish and chips the best in the city. "You only have to see this tiny business working flat out on a Friday evening to know how good the product is," the reviewers wrote.

He mixes his own batter (a secret) and makes his own cole slaw.

Arp reflects on ever-higher fish prices as part of the reason his business is down a little. "It's the suppliers - they're too greedy. They want to drive to work in a Cadillac every morning," he says.

Arp came to Canada from the Netherlands with his wife and three kids in 1966 and put in many long days between his fryer and counter. He often serves more than 100 customers on a Friday and 200-plus on Good Friday.

A man of blunt words, Arp has this advice for would-be "chippies": don't get sick.

"In 38 years, the only times I missed work were when I went to hospital for treatment for prostate cancer and for quadruple-bypass heart surgery."

Now 85, Arp has no intention of hanging up his apron: "I still like what I'm doing. I don't see any reason to quit and sit at home doing nothing."

Pat Currie is a London writer

