

1 - Ahoy, Fish 'n Chips

Reel 'em in with familiar fish 'n chips, but bowl them over with innovation

By Katie Ayoub

Riding high atop three significant trends, fish 'n chips present a world of flavor and texture exploration. The drivers? The here-to-stay casualization of menus, the continuing evolution of gastropub fare and the influence of brash street-food mash-ups. These three converge, thrusting the blue-collar fish 'n chips into the gentrified spotlight. And gentrification—when it comes to flavor stories—can be wonderful. Just look to the hot dog, the burger, the pizza—all elevated beyond pedestrian fare, impressing with inventive carriers, sauces, meats and toppings. Fish 'n chips is riding on the coattails of the fish taco, which reminded folks of just how miraculous flaky fish encrusted in a delightfully crunchy batter tastes. And now it's time for fish 'n chips to demonstrate its own unique swagger. Maybe it gets a flavor infusion from the global pantry—wasabi in the tartar sauce, Indian spices in the batter. Perhaps it shows off its pedigree—an Anchor Steam Beer-Battered Wild Alaskan Cod with Shoestring Fries, like at the two-unit Woodhouse Fish Co. in San Francisco. Or maybe it boasts authenticity, like at The Frying Scotsman, a food cart in Portland, Ore. Whichever way it arrives on the plate (or in newspaper, or in a basket), fish 'n chips brings with it comfort and familiarity. And who doesn't like fried fish?



Crispy-batter fried wild Alaska halibut gets a Southwest spin, served nacho-style with roasted poblano salsa and chipotle tartar sauce.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALASKA SEAFOOD MARKETING INSTITUTE.

“The great thing about fish 'n chips, regardless of the batter, protein or side featured, is that it's something the vast majority of American consumers can relate to,” says Maeve Webster, senior director at Datassential. “It's easy to understand—even with a spin—so it offers a safe way to try something new.” Indeed, fish 'n chips is the ultimate consumer-friendly way in to seafood.

Premium cues within this trend abound. Sustainability becomes an honorable hook to hang one's fish 'n chips on. As evidence, look to McDonald's Filet-O-Fish, which now trumpets wild-caught fish and sustainable fisheries. Add “troll-caught” and “wild harvest” to buzzwords that not only resonate with consumers and add perceived value, but they also actually signal stewardship of our planet's resources. When choosing the species of fish, certification on sustainability also relays a great message to your diners.

“There is considerable white space in foodservice for fish 'n chips to highlight transparency efforts around sourcing,” notes Melissa Abbott of The Hartman Group. “Sustainably sourced

fish and seafood encourages consumers to return to a category they may have left after disappointing Lenten Fish Fridays and ubiquitous fish stick experiences of our youth.”

PUB GRUB, REDEFINED

We know that fish 'n chips are approachable and familiar, but it's not just about accessibility. Meatloaf is accessible, too, but we're not calling it out as a trend. With fish 'n chips, the trend is motored by the possibilities. Playing off the classic British profile, chefs are tinkering with the old standby while still recalling its heritage. And what a heritage—born in Britain in the early 19th Century, it's that nation's original fast food, aimed at a burgeoning working class that needed fare that was cheap, fast and filling. Today, there are more than 10,000 “chippies” in the United Kingdom, outnumbering fast food giants. Here, pub fare that resonates anchors innovation to tradition.

One natural evolution for improved flavor and texture is the beer batter, where the better-beer movement shows itself beautifully. At Flossmoor Station Restaurant & Brewery in Flossmoor, Ill., the Brewery Fish & Chips stars cod dipped in Station Master Wheat Ale Beer Batter and Zephyr Golden Ale Tartar Sauce.

At Tongue & Cheek in Miami Beach, Executive Chef Jamie DeRosa was inspired by New England's take on fried fish. He menus Cheeks 'n Chips, grouper cheeks (sometimes cod or halibut) enrobed in a crisp Pilsner beer batter, served with housemade fries and tartar sauce. “As a Floridian, you forget the magical element of the sea up in the Northeast,” he says. “I first paired the fish with housemade salt and vinegar potato chips, but people expect french fries, so I changed it.”

Robert's Maine Grill in Kittery, Maine, pushes the boundary of fish 'n chips a bit, morphing it into a premium offering with its Allagash Beer-Battered Fried Lobster. Indeed, upscaling various elements in the build works so well here. At Owen & Engine in Chicago, Haddock Fish and House-Cut Chips go upscale, accented by malt vinegar aioli, sauce gribiche and pea purée—a refined play on the traditional British accompaniment of “mushy” peas.

Rob Corliss calls out the beauty of fish 'n chips: “It has the potential to showcase regional flavors and textures from across the United States or globally,” he says. “It's like having a flavor passport.” Within the pub universe, he suggests roasted fingerling wedges with classic cod, malt vinegar and tartar sauce. Or perhaps a Cajun spin, with smashed Yukon Golds



At Robert's Maine Grill in Kittery, Maine, “fish 'n chips” comes in the form of Allagash Beer-Battered Fried Lobster with smoked tomato and lobster reduction, mashed potatoes and micro greens.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBERT'S MAINE GRILL.

served with slabs of crispy catfish and an andouille aioli. And if you're known for your fries? "Make it a fish 'n chips LTO combo by pairing your signature fries with crispy fish bites, tossed to order in an on-trend sauce," he adds.

GLOBAL MAKES A CATCH

Bold is beautiful—this we're seeing across the board in flavor innovation. And like the beloved burger or sandwich, fish 'n chips is a perfect playground for bold global accents. Michael Guerra, executive chef at Havana Beach in Miami's Pearl Hotel, serves Gulf Fish 'n Chips with blue-corn fried Florida pompano, house-cut fries, red cabbage salad and housemade tartar (aioli, capers, cornichon, Worcestershire, lemon juice, parsley). "The flavor of the corn is really pronounced in the batter," he says. "I use pompano because it's a 'trash fish'—it does really well when you fry it, staying flaky and flavorful." (Using such underfished varieties is another link to sustainability, and one that diners will give credit for.)

Another Latin flavor companion that works well here is a creamy chimichurri dip, paired with skin-on russet fries and haddock planks. Moving the fish into a sandwich, at Kitchenette in San Francisco, the Yucatecan Fish Torta sports a fried achiotte-marinated cod.

Asian flavors make a play here, too. At Umi Nom in Brooklyn, chef-owner King Phojanakong menus a Filipino version: panko-crusted tilapia, wasabi-tobiko aioli and fries. "Tilapia is native to the Philippines, so I wanted to feature it on the menu, but I needed to kick up the flavor," he explains. In Boston, Ming Tsai serves Panko Fish 'n Chips on the lunch menu at Blue Dragon, featuring local cod, house fries and Chinese black vinegar aioli. Fatty Fish in New York serves its fried fish with wasabi fries and ponzu dressing. Sea Change in Minneapolis proves that creative sauces are an ideal flavor entry point for this trend—fermented black bean aioli accompanies its fish 'n chips.

"Once an operator lands on a batter/fish combination that works, it can be used in sandwiches, tacos and a wide variety of other applications," says Datassential's Webster. "This versatility makes fish 'n chips a most effective menu item, which is increasingly important today, when operators are looking to streamline menus and maximize efficiency." Indeed, the opportunities with fish 'n chips is as unfathomable and wondrous as the deep blue sea.



Asian flavors like ponzu - in both the marinade and the tartar sauce - play well here.
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