

# Food For Thought

The 2024 riots show us that racism is far from a distant memory in Britain. In a country whose favourite dishes exist because of immigration, what can food tell us about our national identity?

Did those who attended the violent and racist riots last summer get fish and chips on their way home? Or perhaps it was a Chinese, an Indian, or a kebab after a few pints? In the UK, there is an endless list of food that has been directly influenced by immigration. There is a contradiction here: people and cultures that are not seen as British are blamed for the problems the UK is facing, whilst the flavours that have become widely available in the UK, due to immigration, are simultaneously enjoyed and indulged in.

Setting fire to a hotel housing asylum seekers, attacking mosques, and injuring police officers. The riots in the summer of 2024 marked some of the most violent racially motivated attacks the UK has experienced in recent history. Prompted by the brutal killing of children at a Taylor Swift dance class, the BBC have since reported that: “almost immediately after the attack, social media posts falsely speculated that the suspect was an asylum seeker who arrived in the UK on a boat in 2023.” Circulating online was an incorrect name and unfounded rumours that he was a Muslim. This was the spark that lit the fire and fuelled the far right, 36 hours later hundreds of protesters descended into Southport targeting a mosque. And so it began: the build-up of right-wing propaganda came alive.

In 2008, Professor Panikos Panayi of De Montfort University published a book titled *Spicing up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food*. The book explains how dishes celebrated as British, like fish and chips, are in fact not native dishes – fish and chips, he explains, originates from Jewish Portuguese migrants. This claim landed him on a right-wing website under the heading “Know Your Enemy from Within.”

The website also made public the details of his room number at the university, and he was relieved that they did not also share his home address. All this over fish and chips? No; it was about national identity.

At the beginning of Professor Panikos’ academic career, he wrote and published his book, *Racial Violence in Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. He concluded that the age of rioting was over. He now believes that the right-wing violence across Britain last summer signalled a step backwards in time. “You might as well have been in 1915 when there were anti-German riots”, the professor said. In 1915, a British ship was sunk by a German Torpedo which led to riots across Manchester, Liverpool and London. Germans were chased into their home, and over sixty shops in London were attacked and looted.

Yet, this summer’s riots were taking place in 2024, not 1915. Panikos believes that the riots “signify that there are groups in British society, which are obviously violently racist.” He argues against the idea that we should look at the riots from “an economic and dispossessed point of view”, and that these riots can’t be excused by poverty. Instead, he argues, “These people were throwing firebombs. They want to kill them, don’t they?” This was racism, pure and simple, he explains.

It is a vicious cycle, argues Panikos because anti-immigration rhetoric has condoned the violent behaviour. According to Professor Panayi, “It’s legitimised. People think that what they’re doing is legitimate, and the reason they think it’s legitimate is because, Reform, and people to the right of them essentially, are telling us that it’s legitimate.”



Professor Panikos Panayi, in his office at De Montfort University.

What is more concerning to Panikos than the legitimisation of extremist behaviour is the disregard and lack of interest in the narrative around the positive impact of immigration by politicians. He explains that: “politicians never consider the history of immigration... I’m never, ever consulted by politicians on immigration.” His next point may seem obvious, but is particularly pertinent in the current political climate, “How does anything work without immigration in Britain? The weaponisation of immigration just doesn’t make sense.”

During a time when immigration is being weaponised, the positive impacts are not often mentioned. Some of Britain’s most popular dishes, such as Chicken Chow Mein, Fish and Chips, and Chicken Tikka Masala demonstrate the significance of the various diasporas that have settled in the UK and the positive influence that they have had on people’s everyday lives.

It may not always be the first thought when considering the topic, but Panikos suggests that food is “the area where migrants have been most important in British life.”

Food is often an overlooked part of the wider immigration story, and the flavours that are embedded into our psyche tell a much bigger story of our reliance on a multicultural society.

The following weekly features delve into the British fare that wouldn’t exist without the arrival of people into the UK. Sharing perspectives and stories will be individuals who have contributed to the British food landscape, to ultimately shine a light on the positive impact that immigration has had on our taste buds. After all, everyone enjoys eating tasty food.

## “How does anything work without immigration in Britain?”



Boys and men at the Nottingham’s anti-immigration protest.



A vat of chicken curry bursting with flavour.

# “Anatolian base, London garnish.”

**Much more than a restaurant, Mangal II is a UK story of immigration.**

In Britain, Turkish food is synonymous with drinking culture. After a heavy session on the beers, punters fill kebab shops, slurring their words, and trying to make sure they get their order in. Chips, Pizza, Doner kebabs, a selection to soak up poison that has been flowing steadily for the past few hours. Many Brits are also familiar with a much broader and more varied dining experience in the form of Turkish restaurants. It's where diners go to indulge in grilled meats, rice, mezzes, and veg. These restaurants might not serve alcohol but often have a 'bring your own booze' policy which makes the average British person even more excited.

Mangal II is a restaurant located in Dalston, East London. Mangal II was celebrated for introducing the Ocakbaşı method of cooking to the UK. The term Ocakbaşı means grill side and it provides customers with a seat next to the fire allowing them to watch meat being placed onto an open grill and witness the hissing sounds of juices dripping onto the smoky charcoal.

This restaurant tells a story about immigration. It was opened in 1994 by Ali Dirik, a chef from Istanbul. Ali was originally headhunted from Istanbul to run a kitchen in London and introduce the Ocakbaşı method to the UK. After finding success with his first restaurant, Mangal I, Ali opened up Mangal II, and parted ways with his previous business partner.

Mangal II was a hugely popular destination, artists Gilbert & George were regulars and you would occasionally spot a member of parliament tucking into lamb ribs; it was a hub for all things tasty and Turkish. However, like many others in the hospitality sector Mangal II struggled during the Pandemic. Bills were stacking up and the restaurant was empty, something drastic needed to happen.

So what changed? Ali's sons Ferhat and Sertac stepped up, and it was out with the old, in with the new. The restaurant had a makeover. A new generation, who had a good understanding of the London food scene and experience working in Mangal II from a young age, took over. They made changes they knew would work for their renowned institution.

Ferhat grew up in East London, working in the restaurant, cooking, and helping where he was needed. He explained to me over a Turkish tea, that being in the kitchen “was my only way to spend time with my dad. A typical immigrant tale, working six, seven days a week and me wanting to spend time with him. Through that I fell in love with the industry and the restaurant.”

As he got older, he became the front of house manager ensuring that the restaurant was a well-oiled machine. His brother Sertac also grew up cooking, and working in the restaurant from the age of fourteen. For the Dirik's, Mangal is much more than a restaurant. It is their home, a place they did schoolwork, a difficult, and sometimes challenging environment.

A lot has changed since Mangal II first opened its doors. The restaurant has had a makeover and complete menu change; ripping up the rule book of what it means to be a Turkish restaurant in the UK. Sertac had experience cooking in Copenhagen, the knowledge and skills learnt made him push boundaries and created something new. Sertac was awarded Observers Food Monthly's Young Chef of the Year Award (2022), and Mangal II was placed at No 35 in the National Restaurant Awards.



Ferhat Dirik, at Mangal II.

This change didn't come without criticism; ex-customers complained that this was an example of gentrification which pushed out old customers and welcomed a new, hip, rich, middle-class clientele.

The new approach and style of food that Mangal II is serving up is a conscious decision to fight against the stereotypes. Sertaç and Ferhat felt like their cuisine was being cheapened. With customers expecting a lot but not paying very much in return for it. Ferhat questioned this:

"Why do you go into a Turkish restaurant and immediately when you're sat down expect to be offered free bread, free meze, free chili, free garlic sauce? These things all cost money to produce or purchase from outside."

The perception and expectation of traditional Turkish restaurants clearly led to the frustration felt by the brothers. The 'bring your own booze policy' was swapped for a carefully selected range of wines, locally brewed beers, and cocktails. The food changes with the seasons and only the best ingredients available to them are used. It is this modernisation of the restaurant that represents the brothers' experiences and influences of growing up in London. It is a second-generation migrant story that has provided London with a unique dining experience.

Alongside the management of the restaurant, Ferhat also writes a monthly newsletter with the subjects ranging from going sober to racism. One piece is titled "I want my cuntry back", which he wrote during the racist riots in the summer of 2024, through the lens of his old neighbour, whose attitudes led to Ferhat and his ex-partner moving out of their house. The piece begins with the protagonist Terry recalling his night at a kebab shop:

"I'm Terry and I want ma cuntry back. I'm not raysis, I woz sayin to Hassan at the kabab shop lass nite "Haz, ur alrite, but it's all dem other lot comin' ere that take benefiz that riles me up."

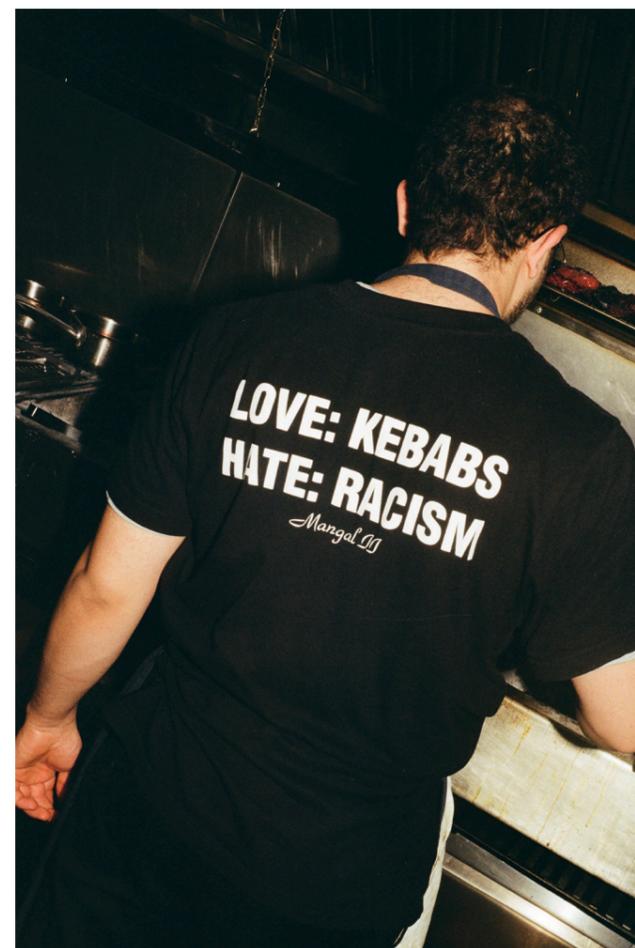
The theme of "I want my cuntry back" is clear: Ferhat is writing about a contradiction in the current state of British politics. The lack of compassion, and more disturbing, the outright hatred and racism towards people that are not deemed as British, whilst the UK continues to benefit from immigration. Tommy Robinson is at the forefront of this culture war and Ferhat includes him in the piece:

"Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, sorry, I meant "Tommy Robinson", he getsit. He sez wot all dem lot in the housiz of parlamen don't say. I woz tellin my GP, Dr Singh, dat he's lucky he's gotta job ere treatin sik people coz if I had my way we'd have only Britesh doctors and Britesh payshunts.

Ferhat described how he was horrified by last summer's riots, and he wanted to show this contradiction through the lens of food: "It's the same individuals who are happy to take from cultures as well when it suits them, particularly through the prism of food". It is through this "prism of food" that Ferhat highlights the impact of Immigration on cuisine in Britain.

Ferhat continually referenced Mangal II as a London restaurant, rather than a Turkish restaurant. Much like the restaurant, Ferhat identifies himself as a Londoner. Working at Mangal II connected him to his heritage in some ways, but it made him question his identity in others. He explained that this is what Mangal II now represents, a place that has its roots in Turkish cuisine, and its branches in Dalston. Ali Dirik cooked food he knew and had mastered growing up in Turkey. His sons were born and raised in East London, so their experiences differ from their dad's. This in turn created something that couldn't exist anywhere else.

London is a melting pot of cultures; you can have a roast on a Sunday for lunch, and for dinner have something lighter like sushi, or some spicy Thai food, often within the same square kilometre. It is multiculturalism at its finest, and it should be celebrated. Without Immigration there wouldn't be Kebabs after a night out, Turkish restaurants, or Mangal II. "Anatolian base, London garnish" are the words on Mangal II's Instagram bio, and it is the perfect summary of who they are.



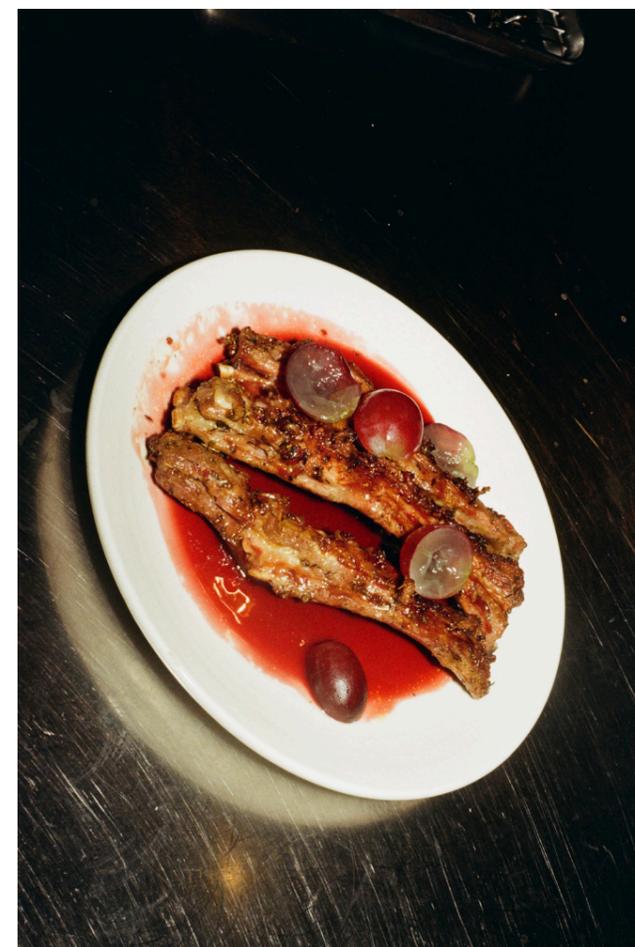
A chef at Mangal II working the grill section.



Lamb ribs being grilled and the juices dripping onto the charcoal.



Ferhat Dirik inspecting the colour of Turkish Tea.



Lamb ribs dressed with sour cherry-molasses and smoked grapes

# Friday Night Dinner

Author Angela Hui shares her experience growing up in one of the UK's most important, but overlooked institutions, the Chinese takeaway.

The excitement builds and the anticipation rises until the doorbell rings and someone shouts “food’s here!” The Chinese takeaway ritual has become tradition for many households across the UK, where Chinese food is widely consumed and loved. Yet the people behind these takeaways are rarely celebrated for their hard work and dedication. Instead, they face racist abuse, stereotyping, and belittling.

“Chinese takeaways have been a staple of British life for decades, yet the people running them often remain ‘foreign’ or ‘unseen’ in the eyes of the community.” This is how Angela Hui, author of the book *Takeaway, Stories From a Childhood Behind the Counter*, describes her experience. She was born in Beddau, a small rural village in South Wales. Her parents left Hong Kong in 1985 in search of a better life: “With little money and no knowledge of English they went wherever there was work and live-in accommodation, moving from Bournemouth to Reading, then London, and finally settling in Wales.” On August 8th 1988 they opened Lucky Star, the number eight is believed to be the luckiest number in Chinese culture, it signifies “good health, fortune and prosperity.”

Angela and her family lived above Lucky Star, so everyone helped in the family business. Angela, along with her two older brothers Jacky and Keen, packed orders, answered the phone, and served customers.

Beddau had been a mining village but by the time the Hui’s arrived, there were only traces of what came before. It suffered like many other ex-mining communities, Angela explains: “It’s a sad story of deprivation, hardship and decline, and what’s left are grim scars of despair, worklessness and industrial gravestones.” This community didn’t have many outsiders, so everyone knew everyone.

For some in Beddau, Lucky Star was their first taste of Chinese cuisine. Angela and her family were newcomers, outsiders and non-white. A mix that did not translate to much respect being shown to the family. The food was loved and enjoyed by their customers, but their culture and heritage? Not so much.

Beddau was home, but she was targeted for the way she looked. When she reflects on her time working at the takeaway, Angela remembers there were prank calls mocking Chinese accents. She recalls a customer asking her “where are you from?” When she answered “Beddau”, he asked again, displeased with her answer. The ignorance and racism she faced made Angela feel like she was out of place, caught between her Chinese heritage and growing up in a small Welsh village.

Despite the struggle to straddle both cultures, by having feet in both worlds she got to learn about two cultures. One of the teachings instilled in her from her parents is the significance of food in Chinese culture. She explained that “In Chinese culture, food is more than just sustenance; it’s a way of showing love, care, and respect.” Angela explained that the first thing Chinese people often say to each other is have you eaten yet? Or “Sik jor fan meh ah?”. It isn’t just a casual greeting according to Angela, “It’s a way of the older generation asking the younger generation if they’re okay.” Checking whether they are looking after themselves or being looked after by the people around them. “Food plays such a central role, whether it’s in celebrations, mourning, family gatherings, or everyday life.”



Feeding frenzy, Hainanese chicken rice a staple in Chinese cuisine.

Another lesson was that “rice is life”. In Asian cuisine, a meal is often not complete without it. What it represents is more than just a nourishing ingredient “Rice is a symbol of sacrifice. It carries history, struggle, and survival.” Angela sees each grain as a reminder of the amount of hard work that went towards building a life in a new country. “It’s a reminder of where we come from and what it took to get here.” In her book, she writes that rice is used to resist racial barriers; what she means by this is:

“Chinese food has been mocked, exoticized, and mis-understood, but rice has always been central to who we are... it connects people across cultures. Whether it’s jollof, risotto, or paella, almost every cuisine has its own rice dish. It feeds billions, crosses borders and creates common ground, when everything else feels divided.”

Angela explained that anti-immigration rhetoric “doesn’t just target new arrivals. It creates this wider sense of exclusion that makes ethnic minorities feel like outsiders, no matter how long we’ve been here.” For her family, who have contributed to their community through food, it is frustrating “to be both needed and ignored at the same time”, Angela explains. People enjoyed the Hui’s being in their village because they were able to get a Chinese takeaway, but they were not truly part of the community because they were deemed as foreign even after years of living there. Angela summarised this eloquently when she said “We’re good enough to make your Friday night dinner, but not always good enough to be seen as truly British.”

It was the divisions between people, rather than their commonality, which were shown through the racist riots in the UK last summer. The word immigrant is often weaponised by politicians and political commentators. This means that the word immigrant can evoke negative feelings and connotations, but to Angela the word represents strength and should be celebrated. She explains that: “To me, the word “immigrant” represents resilience and the pursuit of a better life. It’s a term that speaks to the courage of individuals who leave behind their homes, often facing uncertainty and adversity, in search of new opportunities.”

Angela’s own relationship with Beddau has changed over time. As a child she felt out of place confused about her identity, Beddau was a place she called home but “There were moments when I was reminded that I wasn’t quite like everyone else.” She didn’t feel fully accepted; it was a difficult time. Growing older and reflecting on her experiences she says that Beddau:

“Holds memories of community, of family, and of learning how to find my place in a town that might not always have understood me or loved me back but still accepted me in its own way. Beddau will always hold a special place in my heart; it’s a reminder of my roots that made me who I am today. I’ve cherished my time there and the connections I’ve built, even if it wasn’t always easy.”

What drew the people of Beddau to Lucky Star is the food. Angela’s family brought their food to a rural Welsh village, enriching the local culinary landscape. This is part of a larger story of how immigrants have contributed to the diverse variety of cuisine in the UK. Often, you can taste different parts of the world on the same street. These flavours signify something much deeper than simply satisfying our taste buds: they tell the stories of different cultures that have enriched the UK.

Ordering a Chinese takeaway is one of those occasions that brings people together, for many people it’s a Friday evening ritual, arguing over how many portions of spring rolls to order. Whether or not one rice is enough.

Dissecting immigration through food is perhaps more digestible than other approaches, because it demonstrates just how intertwined and dependent we have become on multiculturalism. Chinese food is now deeply woven within the fabric of British society. From rural Welsh ex-mining villages to the metropolitan cities, there are Chinese takeaways in almost every nook, cranny or corner of Britain.



Have you eaten rice yet T-Shirt, worn during service.

# Two pints and a Naan

**Pubs and mixed grills: a match made in heaven. Desi pubs are a window into multicultural Britain.**

Pubs are simply part of the furniture when it comes to British culture. They are a meeting place for family, friends and colleagues. Another staple of British society is Indian food, and this combination of pints and Indian food is one that many Britons indulge in. A destination where you can get both things is a desi pub.

Desi pubs are pubs that are owned and operated by people of South Asian heritage, they serve booze of course, but there is a focus on the food. Mixed grills, sizzling plates of flavourful lamb chops, chicken tikka, fish pakora. Beautifully charred Naan with a buttery gloss, calling you to rip and dunk it into something. All washed down with a fresh, crisp, alcoholic beverage. It isn't hard to see why desi pubs are becoming more popular.

Author David Jesudason has written a book about Britain's desi pubs, *Desi Pubs, A guide to British-Indian Pints, Food & Culture*. He travelled across the country to review, share stories and celebrate what he believes to be an under-appreciated part of the pub scene. The book is a celebration of multiculturalism. Desi pubs were first set up in the sixties to provide a safe space for people of colour to drink. This was during a period where colour bars still existed, Black and Asian drinkers were forced to drink in separate rooms or not be served at all. As things progressed into the noughties they became more family orientated and the customers more diverse.

The word desi comes from the Sanskrit word *desa* which means land or country. Desi now is used to describe a range of things, from people, traditions and products originating from the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora.

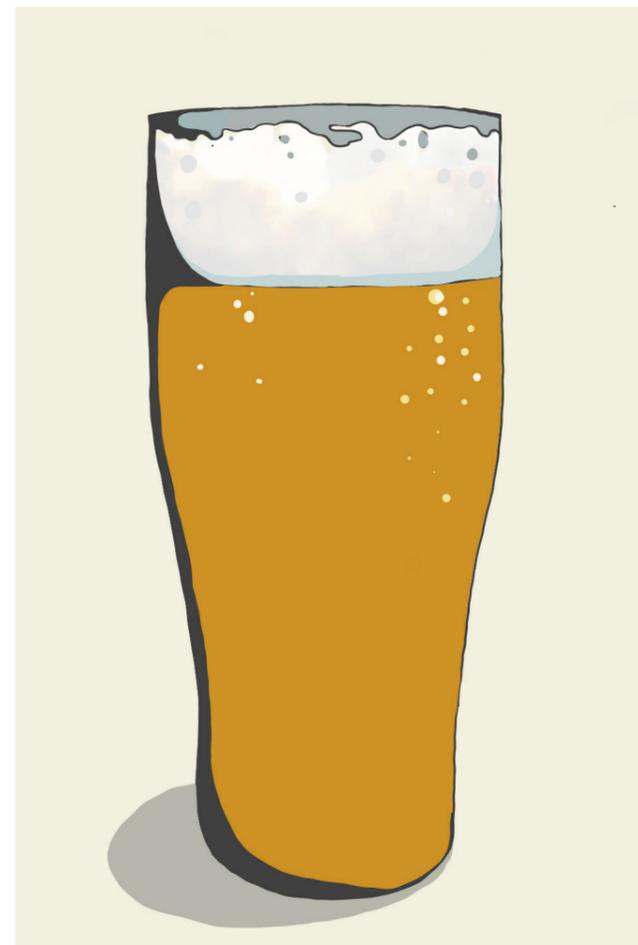
The word desi, is one that David can relate to:

"I've always been slightly disconnected from Asian culture. And I think the word desi in itself has this disconnection, that I can relate to, that relates to the homeland."

The disconnect that David is referring to is something he experienced growing up as an ethnic minority on the outskirts of Dunstable, a relatively rural area with a predominately white demographic. His dad was born in Singapore with Indian origins, and his mum was Malaysian and grew up in a village in Malaysia. Although his parents both had an English- medium education, David doesn't believe that they were prepared for life in England. He explains: "I had this semi-rural upbringing and that's when the racism was really bad. But my parents didn't really give me any resilience to deal with it, or weren't interested in it, so it was very traumatic."

It was in desi pubs that made David feel most at home, the mixing of cultures that represent him. He went to pubs growing up but sometimes wouldn't feel welcomed, there was no one that looked like him, which would sometimes result in code switching: "If the landlord isn't very welcoming, you end up having to do this thing called code switching, changing the way you speak and not being an authentic version of yourself." David explains that when code switching happens, there is a loss for both parties. Ultimately, David believes, "The less code shifting we do, the more enriched we are by other cultures."

As well as being an author David is also a journalist. He was the first BAME winner of Beer Writer of the year. He explained that "I'm not really a beer writer in the sense that I write about beer; I do occasionally, but I'm not really that interested in it, I'm interested in pubs and the social cohesion that they offer."



Graphic by Nancy Rainbow.

This sense of social cohesion and community is what good pubs provide, a place that brings people from all backgrounds and ethnicities together. An example of a desi pub that provides a place for the community is The Red Cow in Smethwick, which is located in a post-industrial-town in the Black country. David explained that in the fifties after working long, hot, and gruelling hours in the Victorian workhouses, which would now be considered slave labour, the Indian workers would quench their thirst by drinking two or three pints at the pub during lunch time. As time progressed, and the mixing of cultures became more normalised, the British Indian workers in the area began going to football games, the local team was and still is West Bromwich Albion. One of the quirks of the Red Cow is that it provides a taxi service for the West Brom fans from the pub to the ground. Free of charge as long as you buy some food and drink. It has become a favourite pre-match destination for people in the area. A space that not only serves delicious mixed grills but also champions inclusivity.

David found that during the visit he made across the country to desi pubs that these spaces were no longer just for ethnic minorities, but they were spaces for everyone, of all races. Not just that, but they were celebrated by white people in the community who are connected to the area and feel proud about them. He explained in his book that during his first visit to Smethwick that he was taken aback by “not just how this was an Asian-majority town dealing with a post-industrial world, but how the white population love their – and ‘their’ is crucial here – desi pubs.”

David believes that desi pubs show what can be achieved when the prejudices are removed, and the fusing between two cultures, British and Indian, come together. This aspect of combining cultures and creating something new is what should be celebrated. He explains how the white people in Smethwick “lived lives far removed from gentrified areas, with many friends who were Asian, and even knew a smattering of Punjabi. Instead of running away or complaining about ‘immigration’ these ordinary people embraced change and discovered their lives could be enriched by it. They had more than earned the right to be proud of their desi pubs”

This is what David hopes his book provides. David uses desi pubs to explore much deeper themes about racism, class, and perceptions in Britain.

These pubs with rich histories, which were first set up in the face of oppression, are used to showcase the benefits of multiculturalism.

In 2001 former Labour foreign secretary Robin Cook made a speech about Multiculturalism and Britishness. He used Chicken Tikka Masala to demonstrate what happens when cultures come together:

“Chicken Tikka Masala is now a true British national dish not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences.” It was a dry Indian dish adapted with sauce “to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy”.

The speech Cook made in 2001 is still relevant today, at a time when anti immigration rhetoric is prevalent, a stark example being the racist riots in the summer of 2024. British cuisine is a way to highlight the importance of the diasporas that have settled in the UK. It would be very challenging to only consume food that is ‘native’ to Britain, this would mean no more; fish and chips, kebabs, chinese takeaways, or curries.

If you’re ever in doubt about whether immigration is a good thing, look no further than the plate in front of you. It is more likely than not that what you are about to eat, which you have been looking forward to, has been influenced by immigration.

**“Chicken Tikka Masala is now a true British national dish not only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences.”**



Mixed grill plater  
illustration by Nancy  
Rainbow.