

Eating Out in the Sixties

There wasn't much choice if you wanted to eat out, particularly in the early sixties. Some hotels catered for non-residents but you would need to book. Some pubs might do chicken or scampi in a basket and Chinese restaurants were making an appearance in the larger towns. Most people went to one of the following four restaurant chains:



Aldo and Frank Berni opened their first restaurant in Bristol in 1956. By 1970 they had 147 hotels and restaurants.

A typical menu:

Starter: melon boat with maraschino cherry OR prawn cocktail

Main: steak OR gammon steak OR plaice, chips and peas

Dessert: Black Forest gâteau OR cheese (Danish Blue or Cheddar: Stilton often carried an extra charge)

Berni Inns was sold to Grand Metropolitan Hotels for £14.5 million in 1970.



Wimpy began in US as Wimpy Grills and was introduced to the UK in 1958 as Wimpy Bar. Lyons acquired the licence and opened the first Wimpy Bar in their Coventry Street Lyons Corner House. By 1970 there were over 500 outlets in the UK and over 1000 in 23 other countries. Typical menu items were hamburger and fries, toasted sandwiches, ice cream sundaes and waffles with maple syrup and cream. In the 80s the brand began to lose out to Burger King. In 1990 it was bought out and re-franchised. It is currently trying to establish itself as a healthier alternative to other fast food chains, but has not managed to shake off its 1970s image.



Kentucky Fried Chicken

Harland Sanders (not a real colonel!) invented a recipe for pressure cooked fried chicken in 1940, using a secret recipe containing 11 herbs and spices. Franchise outlets were originally set up to serve travellers with 600 of them established by 1963. The iconic KFC Bucket Meal was invented in 1957.

England had the first overseas branch of KFC which opened in Preston, Lancashire in May 1965, and was the first American fast food restaurant chain in the country, pre-dating the arrival of McDonald's, Burger King and Pizza Hut by almost a decade. The first London branch opened in North Finchley in November 1968 and by 1971 there were 31 outlets. Today there are over 900. KFC has had many owners including Pepsico and is currently owned by Yum! Foods.



Little Chef

Sam Alper opened the first Little Chef in Reading in 1958. It was designed as a transport cafe to suit the family market. It grew slowly - 12 brick-built units seating around 40 customers were built by 1965, rising to 25 by 1968 when Gardener Merchant bought the company. Most outlets were situated on A roads and specialised in the Olympic All-day Breakfast and Jubilee Pancakes. It expanded rapidly in the 1970s after Gardner Merchant were acquired by Trust House Forte but years of under-investment followed. A succession of new owners could not revitalise an ageing brand and the last outlet ceased using the name in 2018.



Goods drivers were catered for with a number of transport cafes which the private motorist tended not to use. Motorway service stations sprang up as the motorway network developed. These often had two sections - private motorists went in by the front entrance for sandwiches or mixed grills and truck drivers went round the back for sausage, egg and chips.

The first service station at Watford Gap was ready for the opening of the M1 in 1960, though it only sold sandwiches and operated out of a shed. In later years, when fast driving was still a novelty, motorway restaurants offered a fine dining experience.

On the M6, the Charnock Richard service station opened in 1963 and was operated by Trust House Fort. A main course cost from 5s to 14s 6d (£3 to £9 in today's money) in 1968.

The ultimate dining experience was at Leicester Forest East on the M1. Leicester Forest East opened in 1966 and was operated by Ross Frozen Foods. The main attraction was a bridge restaurant furnished by Terence Conran, 'The Captain's Table'. Waiters and waitresses in nautical costume served the finest available fish from Ross's fleet. In fine weather people were prepared to sit on the balcony and watch the traffic. *Motoring Which?* found the service superb at the Captain's Table and the food quality good. Leicester Forest East was the only motorway service station with food up to the Good Food Guide standards, at least in 1968.

Forton Services on the M6 near Lancaster opened in 1965. It was operated by Top Rank Motor Inns, part of the giant media and entertainment combine, J Arthur Rank. It was Top Rank's second 'Motor Port' as they called them. The centre piece of Forton was a hexagonal tower, which resembled an aircraft control tower. The Tower Restaurant, which it housed, was the most upmarket dining experience offered at Forton. Diners had views over Morecambe Bay and to the Lakeland fells beyond.



Mecca, who already owned ballrooms and restaurants, opened their first and only service station at Trowell on the M1 in Nottinghamshire, in 1967. They preferred to call it a 'Village'. Mecca combined modern architecture with a fantasy Robin Hood theme. The visitor was greeted by two jousting knights in the foyer. Once inside the 'Village' he or she could dine at the 'Sheriff's Restaurant' or 'Marian's Pantry'.

Eating in the street or on a bus was generally frowned on. You could get away with a boiled sweet but chewing gum was regarded as a disgusting American invention. The exception was occasional bag of chips on the way home from the cinema - smelling hot and vinegary on a cold winter's evening!