

The survival of the traditional British 'caff', Duncan Smith 13 February 2015

On the UK's high streets it is survival of the fittest. Yet, in the age of the double-shot, low-fat, no-foam latte, the traditional cafe - or "caff" - lives on.

With their prescriptive queuing rules and confusing names for small, medium and large cup sizes, the chain coffee shops seem to be accepted as the place to go for a caffeinated pick-me-up and a bite to eat. The identikit decor and handy loyalty card stamps pull us in and keep us coming back - but also leave some people cold.

For Seb Emina, author of the London Review of Breakfasts blog, nothing less than what is sometimes affectionately known as a "greasy spoon" will do. We're talking glass sugar dispensers with red and brown sauce bottles on laminate tables, jets of steam rising from industrial looking chrome tea machines and menus that cater for your every culinary need - from a fruit juice to a full roast, a fry-up to an apple crumble and custard.

"It's not just the food - in fact that is almost secondary to the general atmosphere," says Mr Emina. "I'd rather have fluorescent strip lights and hand-written menus. "It's also a sense of history in some of them. They feel like they have been around a long time and they are friendly but not over familiar."

One example is E. Pellicci - which has been serving up British and Italian fare to the folk of Bethnal Green, East London, since 1900. Inside the bustling cafe, history is evident all around. The wood panelled walls feature Pellicci family photos dating back to the founder herself, Elide Pellicci.

The late Nevio Pellicci, son of the founder, ran the cafe through much of the 20th Century and into the 21st. His death six years ago, at the age of 82, means the future of the cafe is now in the hands of his children, Anna and Nevio. For Ms Sereno, coming to work each day is a joy. "I feel like I've won the lottery really, I do work every day but I love doing it. People come in and they almost feel like I am part of their extended family. It's lovely, it's never a chore."

Business appears to be booming, with customers often queuing out the door. So what - beyond the general atmosphere - draws customers back to traditional cafes? Denise Clarke, co-owner of Mary's Kitchen cafe in Nottingham, believes fresh produce is the key to the British cafe's continued success.

"People know that they are going to get fresh food," she explained. "It's not loaded down with salts and things and it is homemade. We make homemade cakes which go down very well and we serve all day breakfasts."

Despite a downturn in trade over the past three years, Ms Clarke now reports customer numbers are increasing. And while Mary's Kitchen might not have an extensive list of avant garde coffees to choose from, that doesn't bother customers.

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"We use a good brand of teabag which a lot of cafes don't bother with. We do serve a lot of bus drivers and they prefer tea to coffee."

Homemade food keeps some people coming back for more, but for others, it's the price.

"We've got regulars that have been coming 38 years," said George Nicholaides, owner of The Olympic in Leeds. "But we also attract a lot of old and homeless people. Nothing is bought in and we use good quality stuff. The food is very good, it's all homemade and it's cheap."

Part of their longevity is also down to savvy business sense. Mr Nicholaides bought the building when it came up for sale years ago, thus removing the burden of making enough money to pay high city centre rents.

"In the 1980s we were very busy. We had all the regulars come in and they brought their families and there were cafes all up and down [the street]," he said. "But they closed when McDonalds and Starbucks and the chicken shops came in and because rents and rates have gone up. We keep going though."

Other independent cafes report that service with a smile is one way to keep customers parting with their pennies.

Dorino Tabrizi runs Alpino's in Islington, North London, which has been filling the bellies of hungry Londoners since 1948. Mr Tabrizi has been in charge for eight years, although he has been in the trade for a lot longer than that. For many years he ran a successful restaurant in North London and now brings the same exacting standards to running his cafe.

"The food is the main thing, and the service," he says. "I pay people to serve the customers properly seven days a week."

Frank Barone - of Gino's in central London - thinks that "You have to be nice to the customer," he says. "The food must be fresh, you must be fast and you have to give good value for money. And a big smile - that's my secret."

1. Discuss the author's attitude to the traditional British café. (20)
2. Analyze the effect of using quotes in the passage. (20)
3. Explain with examples the reason for using capital letters in the passage. (4)
4. What does the phrase "avant garde" mean? (2)
5. Explain the use of the phrase "survival of the fittest". (8)

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