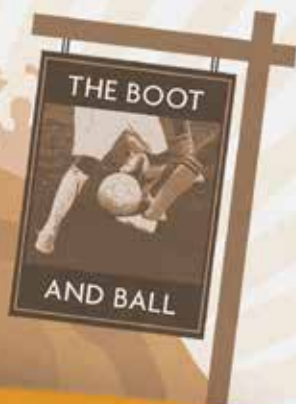


JACK PEAT



THE

GREAT PIE

Revolt



**A GASTRONOMIC GUIDE TO THE
PREMIER LEAGUE AND EFL**

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Introduction: The understated connection between food and football

IT'S THE opening day of the season and an emerald-blue sky meets a rickety train as it snakes out of the dimly lit London Liverpool Street station headed for Southend. Skimming the terrace tops of Mile End, it passes West Ham's doughnut-shaped London Stadium in the old Olympic Park, making a final stop in Stratford before hurtling east towards the tip of the Thames. You can't help but feel a sense of fervent optimism in the air among those who have boarded for the early-August fixture on the coast. After a sun-drenched, football-free summer, filled with tennis, cricket and time with the other half, it feels good to have the old gang back together. The season is young, the possibilities are endless and speculative chitter-chatter reverberates around the carriage. Football is back and, all of a sudden, all is well with the world.

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But this season I have decided to do things a little differently. Where usually I would head straight to the ground, to be fed and watered within its proximity, I have decided that the time has come to look further afield. I want to get a sense of a place's identity through the food and drink it produces and make this as big a part of the matchday experience as the match itself. I want to warm my belly with panackelty and stottie in Sunderland, sample the best Shropshire Blue in Shrewsbury, try rag pudding in Oldham and feast on seafood at coastal games. I want to drink local beer, sample small-scale craft ales and even indulge in a glass of wine or two if that's what sets a place apart. I want to eschew the over-the-counter culture that has become the scourge of Football League grounds to develop a deeper appreciation of provenance and the rich diversity that can be found on our tiny island. In short, I want to understand what makes the place I have taken the time to travel to different from the last place, and that requires looking further afield than the confines of the ground.

Just plain awful

I have been a football fan throughout my life, and few things give me more pleasure than a good away day. I enjoy the singing, the camaraderie and the sense

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of togetherness one gets from travelling to far-flung places with your native townspeople. But one thing I have always found wanting is good food and drink. Sadly, balti pies served out of tin trays, rubbery burgers that cost the best part of a tenner and gravy served in polystyrene cups are a seemingly inevitable part of the football ground catering offering. And while some do it better than others, the reality is that there are few exceptions to the rule.

In 1998 researchers writing for *Colman's Football Food Guide* spent months testing food at the 92 league grounds in England and Wales, plus Wembley. They concluded that the 'taste of the Orient' should be kicked firmly into touch, while summarising the Wembley fare as 'just plain awful'. Even Norwich City, with Delia Smith on the board of directors, didn't get off lightly, landing in a 'disappointing' 61st place out of 93.

The guide noted of Wembley that 'The nation's showcase stadium epitomises everything that's wrong with food at football grounds in this country, an awful, overpriced eating experience', and you would struggle to disagree. Football grounds to this day are hellish experiences for food enthusiasts or even just people with functioning taste buds, and the problem can be summed up by the response of Leyton Orient's club spokesman to the club's lowly position: '

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‘It’s very subjective,’ he said. ‘Out of 93 clubs, two thirds are exactly the same.’ The other third, I would argue, are just a slightly different shade of beige. You may get a somewhat tastier pie at Wigan or a slightly fresher pint at Burton, but by and large the catering at football grounds is pretty much cut from the same cloth. While *Coleman’s Guide* set out to do for football what Egon Ronay did for British pub food and motorway service stations, the offering has hardly improved within the last two decades. In many ways, it has got worse.

The great pie revolt

If in '98 the food served in football stadiums was of differing quality, now it is all pretty much the same. Large-scale caterers such as Centerplate, CGC Event, Sodexo and many others ensure most football grounds are tarred with the same nondescript, banal brush. The pies – a staple part of the average football fan’s diet – are generally Pukka (the brand, not the Jamie Oliver adjective), and everything else carries a brand that contributes little to the matchday experience but probably a lot to the club’s bottom line.

Football clubs, the commercially driven entities that they now are, know that they have a captive audience as soon as a spectator walks through the gate. They are

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the Ryanair of catering or the juddering food trolley that makes its soulless way down train aisles in the hope that some hapless punter will pay £3 for a sachet of instant coffee. They will happily charge a fiver to hand over a Snickers and a mashed tea bag in hot water because, like being trapped at 30,000 feet in a no-frills tin can en route to Alicante, where else are you going to go?

But for one club, this reality had become all too grim. Mindful that they had once been crowned the FSF's Premier League Away Day of the Year in 2015, Wigan Athletic's fanzine editor and author Martin 'Jimmy' Tarbuck started a petition asking the powers that be at Wigan Athletic and the DW Stadium to stock pies from local company Galloways rather than some bland, generic, petrol station fare. According to Alan Moore of the podcast *The Pie at Night*, it raised a serious point. Following the closure of local supplier Pooles, which had been widely credited with Wigan's rise to fame in the fans' ranks after an illustrious 170-year history, the club brought in Holland's Pies, which despite boasting some provenance (hailing from Baxenden, near Accrington in Lancashire) failed to meet the mark in regards to quality, being more suited to 'truck drivers, travelling salesmen and rubbish indie bands touring the country,' Moore said.

The switch is typical of the generic catering situation that is found across the country, doing little to tantalise

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the taste buds and damaging the club's role as a focal point of the community. It also highlights a missed opportunity in supporting local businesses, local jobs and strengthening the local economy. The petition bore little fruit as the organiser's cries fell on deaf ears, but the club did agree to honour the town's love of the savoury dish by unveiling a new mascot for the 2019/20 season, a pie named Crusty.

Staggis and Blaggis

But Wigan's rightful place as the UK's pie capital still stands, even if travelling supporters can't get a taste of their proud heritage at the ground. Galloways may have been shunned in favour of the (probably cheaper) Holland's Pies at the DW, but there are several outposts outside of the stadium where their 'quintessential Wigan' meat and potato pie can be sampled, along with the special Staggis (steak and haggis) and Blaggis (black pudding and haggis) pies, which are made using meat supplied by the local butcher, H. Greaves & Son of Skelmersdale.

Those who are a little more adventurous might also consider a trip to Wigan's best-kept secret, the Pepper Lane Pie Shop. The traditional bakers attract custom from far and wide to their quiet corner of Wigan, with

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queues out of the door often seen from 10am. Formerly known as Gents, the bakery's pies have been tipped as the best in the north-west by one local aficionado, even perhaps England. In his words, 'if tha' can beat it, crack on', but you'd do well; most pies these days do 'now't but give you third-degree burns ont' top o' thy mouth', and when you bite into them and get to the nitty-gritty 'it's now't other than mashed-up slop'. On the other hand, Gents serve up pies that require two hands to eat and use proper meat sauce and real chunks of steak – better than anything Pukka could ever dish up.

And they're not alone. Manze's in Deptford, a stone's throw from The Den in Millwall and The Valley in Charlton, is renowned in south-east London for its pie, mash and liquor offering that spills over the edge of a plate for less than the price of a standard matchday pie. The so-called 'home of pie 'n' mash' has a proud history stretching back to 1902 when the 'godfather', Michele Manze, served up the standard savoury affair alongside eels (jellied or stewed) in authentic surroundings. The recipe hasn't changed until this day and the price has only risen modestly in line with inflation. Rhyming slang is, of course, a must on any visit. A cup of Rosie Lee (tea) goes down very well as the café's standard offering.

A quest for authenticity

Both Manze's and Gents offer a sense of authenticity that no longer exists at football grounds from a gastronomic perspective, which is a real shame given that both lie within spitting distance of their local football clubs. In Millwall, the so-called Bermondsey Beer Mile incorporates some 17 brilliant local breweries with the Fourpure 'base camp' just five minutes away from The Den, where you will find a Carlsberg Ice Bar instead. In Burton, known as the world's most important beer town, they serve typical run-of-the-mill lagers at the Pirelli even though the Beech Hotel has a well-stocked shipping container bar just seven minutes away on foot.

I'll go on. The chance of seeing seafood at Southend's Roots Hall is slim to none even though the ground is moments away from some of the best cockles, mussels and whelks the country has to offer, as is getting your hands on a Hull Pattie at the KCOM or a nice parmo in Middlesbrough's Riverside Stadium. Finding a proper Cornish pasty at Plymouth Argyle's Home Park is impossible, and enjoying a warm oatcake at Port Vale is regrettably not an option either. There are no Eccles cakes in Salford's Moor Lane, laverbread at Swansea's Liberty Stadium or Welsh rarebit at Cardiff City Stadium. Even Everton have stopped handing out the famed

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mints that were once a staple part of the Goodison Park experience.

But outside of the stadium, these local treats can be found in abundance, which is why this season, on a train headed for Southend, I decided to drag the gang off one stop before the central station and a few nautical miles down the estuary at Leigh-on-Sea, where seafood huts line the shore and punters queue up for lobster, crab, oysters, pickled herring, mussels, potted shrimp, cockles, winkles, smoked eel and more, before carrying it to the outdoor terrace to enjoy with a pint of local ale. The summer heat kissed our necks and arms as we developed T-shirt suntans around our jerseys, baking in the heat without a care in the world. When it got to within half an hour of the game we had to drag ourselves away to watch the very thing we came here to do. But what struck me as we made the short jaunt to Roots Hall is that the outcome wouldn't have mattered. Win or lose, we had made the journey worthwhile before a ball had been kicked, which, as anyone who has faithfully supported lower-league mediocrity will attest, is a desirable proposition.

The Great Pie Revolt is, as such, my quest to make away days more palatable, to marry football and food to create a more rounded, wholesome day out. It is my attempt to make the Football League a gateway into exploring the rich gastronomic map of Britain, to put local cuisine

back on the agenda and to eschew the abject uniformity that has swept across stadium canteens. From Cornish pasties served out of the back of a van to panackelty and stottie served in a lighthouse, this is the ultimate companion for eating and drinking your way through the country's professional football pyramid.

Accrington Stanley

Fact box

Nickname – Stanley

Colours – Red

Ground – Crown Ground

Built in – 1968

Capacity – 5,450

Introduction

‘Accrington Stanley, who are they?’ you exclaim in the same high-pitched Scouse accent that is channelled by every football fan in the country at the mere mention of their name. In the 1980s, the Milk Marketing Board deemed the club so obscure they made them the star of a marketing campaign featuring two aspiring footballers who, acting under Ian Rush’s guidance, made sure to drink their milk so they didn’t end up on the club’s books. At the time, Stanley were a non-league outfit and reportedly earned a tidy £10,000 from the ad, which would help sustain them until 2006 when they returned to the Football League. In their first season back, they played and won their first-ever Football League Cup match against former European Cup winners Nottingham Forest. They eventually got knocked out by Watford in a competition many still refer to as the Milk Cup, named after the same Milk Marketing Board that bestowed upon them that most grating turn of phrase.

What to eat and where to eat it

- **Th'Owd Stables**

Try your hand at taming a 'stallion' at Th'Owd Stables, a micro café based in converted stables at the back of The Abbey Hotel. Three rashers of bacon and three sausages get served alongside the usual full English breakfast mashings, with smaller 'hungry horse' and 'the stables' breakfasts available for those who forgot to wear loose-fitting trousers.

- **The Butty Shop**

Along with The Butty Box, Proper Butties and Waynes BUTTY VAN, The Butty Shop (the second of the same name) is the jewel in Accrington's butty-shaped crown, serving a range of sandwiches, jacket potatoes and pies. If you're looking for something to set you up for the day, try their 'bin lid', a fluffy bap amply filled with bacon, sausage and eggs.

- **Smokehouse 138**

Big and bold, Smokehouse 138 is a small American diner a short walk away from the Crown Ground in Clayton-le-Moors. Serving dirty burgers stuffed with slow-cooked meats, ribs and fried chicken, they laugh in the face of the round plate, dispensing their Man vs Food-sized portions on tin trays that speak to your inner carnivore.

What to drink and where to drink it

• **Grants Bar**

From a run-down, metal-shuttered eyesore to one of the most thriving and burgeoning establishments in the locality, Grants Bar is a beacon of the microbrewing revolution that breathed new life into local pubs across Britain. Serving beer from the local Big Clock Brewery, the tap is a great place to start the day, with pizzas and sharing plates available to help line your stomach.

• **The Crown**

A handy stop before the game, The Crown is a pub serving a rotating selection of cask ales in a traditional setting. On matchdays, The Little Crown is open in the car park that backs on to the ground, serving a range of butties to wash down with a fresh beer.

• **Thorn Inn**

Escape to rural Lancashire by taking a short stroll up to where the Tinker Brook meets the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, where you will find a typical Lancastrian pub with a blackened brick exterior and a cosy setup inside. Bank Top's Flat Cap is a regular feature on the taps, with a full complement of Thwaites beer also on show.