

IN GOOD TASTE

Pub Hub

IN LONDON, THE LOCAL PUBS AREN'T MERELY PLACES TO GET A DRINK; THEY'RE COMMUNITY CORNERSTONES — AND MUST-SEE ATTRACTIONS FOR VISITORS.

BY J.B. BISSELL

Say *bar* in the U.S., and you could be describing any number of drinking establishments. We've got sports bars and live-music venues, fancy late-night lounges and taprooms. If you're near a perpetually sunny coast, you'll likely find entire drinkeries dedicated to alcohol-infused slushies. Even speakeasies, complete with artisan cocktails, are making a comeback.

Folks in England, however, imbibe a bit differently. Sure, you can find themed establishments, but the vast majority of tipping takes place in neighborhood pubs. By *pubs*, I mean old-fashioned public houses that have been around since before America tapped its first keg.

Seriously, some of London's alehouses date back to the 16th and 17th centuries. In other words, they're bona fide historical landmarks, which, to me, sounds like the perfect excuse to spend most evenings of your vacation knocking back a few pints with the locals.

YE OLDE ESTABLISHMENTS

It's impossible to know for sure when the very first pub opened in London (definitive facts start to get hazy anytime you have to qualify a date with "A.D."). The consensus, though, is that once the Romans arrived, so did places where one could get a glass of wine. It didn't take long for native residents to introduce their preferred beverage — ale — to the proprietors of those shops, or even start their own pop-up roadhouses. So,

it's safe to say that by about A.D. 50, it wasn't too hard to find a good brew around town.

That certainly remains the case today, and a good place to start — especially if you want to mix your suds with a shot of history — is the Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese. But first, be sure you're at the Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese and not the Cheshire Cheese (a cool spot in its own right). Don't worry, while they're only about a 15-minute drive apart, there's really no mistaking one for the other.

The Ye Olde version was rebuilt in 1667 after the Great Fire (previous to that, it was the Horn Tavern and dated back to 1538). The exterior resembles a foreboding mahogany fortress, and, indeed, allows no natural light to seep inside. Folklore asserts that Charles Dickens sat on these very stools with a pen and pad — and pint — within reach. If you meander around the puzzling floor plan, with its various small rooms on multiple levels, it's simple to imagine how he could have easily blocked out the real world here in order to create one of his own.

Over on the River Thames, The Mayflower has gone by a handful of names throughout the centuries, but what's important is that beer has been served here since 1550. What's utterly astounding is that it took its current and most-lasting call sign from the very famous sailing vessel that is rumored to have moored here *before* it set out on its very famous voyage.

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Locals gather at The Crown Tavern's outdoor seating area in the historic Clerkenwell Green neighborhood.



A true London landmark, Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese displays the list of 15 monarchs who have reigned since the "new" pub was rebuilt in 1667.



Ale, bitter, mild, lager, stout — most pubs offer a range of draught options. Consult the bar staff if you're not sure what to order.





A multitude of memorabilia decorates The Churchill Arms, named for the late prime minister. His grandparents were frequent visitors of the establishment.

Let that sink in for a moment. Because, yes, you read that correctly, and yes, that's exactly what I'm getting at.

There's a possibility that some of the 102 Pilgrims (and more likely the 30-odd crew members) who sailed west in 1620 to settle the New World stopped in to what's now known as The Mayflower for a beverage before they raised anchor and unfurled the sails of their *Mayflower*.

Decorations are properly nautical. There are tanker mugs on the tables and model ships on the shelves. Yet, simply saying the place has a maritime atmosphere is an understatement. With the dark wood flooring, flickering lanterns hanging overhead, and fantastic view of the river, it's more of a full-blown time capsule, and while sitting here, sipping on a Darkstar Hophead or Mayflower Scurvy, it's hard not to feel a bit overwhelmed by some of the historical scenes that surely played out here.

REAL ALE

There was a time (probably back when the aforementioned Pilgrims frequented these parts) when you could walk into a pub and simply ask for ale. The bartender would grab a glass and pour you a pint of the house brew, whatever flavor and strength that might be. Happily, that's not the case anymore. Every establishment will have at least a handful of choices — some more than others — that could range from local craft brews to world-renowned classics to seasonal varieties.

Of particular note is the "real ale," which, according to the Campaign for Real Ale, an organization founded in 1971, "is a natural product brewed using traditional ingredients and left to mature in the cask (container) from which it is served in the pub through a process called secondary fermentation."

The key distinction of real ale is that it remains a living, breathing product. Unlike typical keg beers, the yeast isn't filtered out, and it's not pasteurized. So the flavor and body of the brew continues to develop and evolve right up until it's in your glass.

The Southampton Arms has become a local favorite in part because of its dedication to real ale. It features a diverse cask selection, and because of the popularity of both the beers and the place itself, it's not uncommon for some of the taps to change out every two or three days. So if you visit for a late lunch on Monday, by Wednesday night, there might be a couple new real ales to sample. (Just be sure to bring cash; credit cards aren't accepted.)

Ale, real or otherwise, isn't the only thing to drink at London's best pubs. The Southampton Arms, for example, has an array of ciders on hand, too. And while The Crown Tavern keeps an impressive rotation of five different real ales available among its 16 draughts (remember, with no pasteurization, conditions have to be just right so the batch doesn't spoil), it's also well-known for serving a hearty breakfast bloody mary.

If you're interested in other spirits, The Dog and Duck — along with their lineup of quality brew — specializes in top-shelf gin. Selections run the gamut from Adnams Copper House to Opihr Oriental Spiced to Williams Great British, and can be served with a simple garnish — an orange or lime — or fused with ginger ale or a variety of tonics.

NEW PUB FARE

The biggest change to London's public houses in recent years is the increased selection of food. Peanuts and pork scratchings (cracklings or rinds) were always on the menu, but many places now offer snacks and meals that are much more substantial — and appetizing.

The Spaniards Inn, a truly historic spot that is said to have been established in 1585, has embraced the cuisine revolution as much as any of the city's more modern establishments. Yes, you can still go traditional and order fish and chips or a British Isles rib eye. Although, before you do, peruse the other options. It might be difficult to pass up the seared scallops with pancetta and red pepper puree or the homemade sweet potato gnocchi in a sage butter sauce.

Or what about a bowl of pad Thai or roasted duck curry? In

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what has to be one of the most interesting gastronomical combinations anywhere, The Churchill Arms houses a cooked-to-order Thai restaurant. And it's not just some novelty experiment carried out as a blatant attention grab. They've been serving spring rolls and *pad nahm prik pao* alongside a vast collection of Winston Churchill relics and other bar trinkets for more than 25 years.

As tantalizing as the Thai food-British pub juxtaposition might be (and there's no doubt it seems like something you really should be exposed to), the real reason to stop in at The Churchill Arms — or The Crown Tavern, The Mayflower, Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese, or any of the dozens of other lounges around London — is because they're such a deep-rooted part of the community.

Public houses got started so that folks could gather in one place and converse about what was going on in their world. In London, that's still the central focus, and the pubs are still where you'll find local business people and artists, students, and even families coming together at the end of the day to reconnect. It's not about neon lights, loud music, or 74-inch flat screens. It's about sitting down and sharing a story with your people. So often we want authentic travel experiences, and just as often they're hard to find. Not in London. Simply stroll over to the nearest pub, sit down, and ask for a pint of real ale. ■



Bangers and mash (aka sausages and mashed potatoes) are quintessential British comfort food and a pub menu classic.

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