



By: *Catriona M. Munro*, TA Editor in Chief

A cocktail of joy



For some reason, The Times reported this week that the most popular lunchtime snack in the UK is - and has been for some decades - a prawn and mayonnaise sandwich on brown sliced bread, sealed in a plastic triangular container, available at any half-decent midday fuel provider.

Nowadays, if you feel adventurous, you might opt for an addition of chunks of avocado, if that is on offer.

So why are these cross-looking, ridiculously tentacled, occasionally bearded ocean crustaceans so eternally popular here?

We import a whopping £691.8 million every year, which in 2021 equated to 120 300 tonnes.

And we don't really bother to produce enough despite our seafaring culture; there are specialised farms which provide them in special chic forms on upmarket websites at throat-cutting expense.

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In the 1980s, foreign influences finally - if briefly - prompted us to look beyond our shores for a more varied approach to food, and nouvelle cuisine became "the thing" in the UK, which was hitherto not known for its innovation and adventurousness about eating habits.

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I learned how to love and treat dead prawns during my French exchange one summer in the 70s.

We sat outside with enormous bowls of the

cooked, pink sea insects; my host family taught me how to bust the shells in one fell swoop and surgically remove the grey, thread-like vertebra. For me, it was the launch of a love affair.

The point about prawns is that they must be one of the most versatile foods in the gastronomic repository.

It is difficult to dispute that South Eastern cuisine tends to make much better imaginative and creative use of them, with the use of endless condiments, spices and vegetables, fruits and intriguing flavourings.

I wonder how a Thai or an Indian would respond to a request for a bog standard prawn and mayonnaise sandwich...?

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BUT - we have prawn cocktail! One of the best inventions of the 20th century after the television, telephone and stretchy jeans! Not a Molotov cocktail nor a piña colada; but prawns (or shrimp, as they are confusingly known in certain countries).

When you went out to a restaurant in the 1970s UK, the menu was restricted and ritualistically familiar. The starter would be either a bowl of home made soup, a glass of fruit juice served on a saucer, or - joy of joys - a prawn cocktail.

It would be served in a long stemmed wine glass, three quarters full of shredded lettuce, absent of any kind of vinaigrette or any other type of flavouring. On top of this delight were a few prawns, perhaps with some kind of thrilling additional sauce.

The most popular was the "Marie Rose"

variant, which I believe was a mixture of mayonnaise and tomato ketchup. Delicious! It would be followed by Steak Diane and the blazing finale of crêpes Suzette. A gastronomic cornucopia!

My tribute to the glories of a prawn cocktail is based on my utter failings as a waitress. As a teenager, I had a holiday or sometimes term-time job at the local hotel, which was unfortunately reminiscent of the Bates Motel.

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In summer, it was a convenient stop off for tourists. My clumsy service involved spilling boiling hot gravy on a woman's almost bare foot.

Worse was my discovery that the tipping point of spaghetti bolognese is not far away from the rules of gravity: when it moves, it moves in one fell swoop. On this occasion, straight into another woman's handbag, leaving a sparkingly clean plate.

I instinctively snatched her handbag and ran to the kitchen; she pursued me and caught me trying to pull out long strands of spaghetti and scalding lumps of bolognese into the bin. She was not amused.

The hotel in winter was unfortunately reminiscent of the Bates motel. It attracted few guests - generally lone "travelling salesmen" or a visiting "educational inspector". Little did I know that a prawn cocktail would trigger my finest hour.

There was a travelling salesman having dinner alone in the dining room. He ordered prawn cocktail followed by a steak and some ice cream. When I served the cocktail, he gave it a

look of contempt, and said, "I want some thousand island dressing. Surely you have some? Where is it?"

I had no idea what thousand island dressing was; nor did the slightly inebriated chef. I apologised, but the customer refused to let it lie. "Everyone knows what it is! Come on!"

He carried on in this vein throughout the prawn cocktail and the steak; his complaints becoming increasingly intense rather than abating.

Finally, I went into the larder to find something to sprinkle on his ice cream and - hallelujah - I caught sight of a bottle of what resembled thick orange gloop, which bore the tag, "thousand island dressing". My eyes met those of the inebriated chef. "I dare you", he said.

I dared. I said, "here you go", and squirted an attractive decoration of orange gloop on top of his ice cream. He laughed uproariously, and gave me a £5 tip.

I doubt I'll get a waitressing job again, if only because the drunken chef reported me. But all hail the prawn cocktail! Like some other foods, it moves in mysterious ways.