



Polishing Up a Greasy Spoon

Take a dowdy roadside diner (the U.K.'s Little Chef chain). Add one culinary mastermind (Fat Duck chef Heston Blumenthal). Whisk together, then bring to a boil... // BY JAY CHESHES

FOR HALF A CENTURY, Fat Charlie, the toque-wearing mascot of the Little Chef restaurant chain, has been a pudgy beacon for hungry truckers and road-tripping families searching for sustenance during long hauls at the wheel. At its height in the 1980s, the chain had a virtual monopoly on roadside dining in Britain, with 330 outlets across the U.K. But due to changes in eating habits and increased competition, that number has dwindled to 177. Modeled on American diners, the restaurant's sprawling menu was

known for its lowbrow British grub. Massive breakfasts, served day and night, were by far the most popular items. Though the food was nothing to swoon over, whether you were outside of Manchester or just shy of Brighton, it did a reliable job of filling you up.

So how to explain the mouthwatering fare I discovered—red wine-braised ox cheeks, steak with Béarnaise, mussels fragrant with white wine and herbs—at

BURGERMEISTERS Popham cooks serve revamped fish-and-chips and burgers.

a Little Chef next to a gas station on the A303 near the tiny hamlet of Popham? And why were there Pop Rocks, black olives and saffron in the sweet custard trifle I devoured for dessert?

Little Chef, it turns out, is growing up. After being rescued from bankruptcy in 2007 by new owners, the chain embarked on an unlikely experiment, singling out a typical Little Chef for public flogging on the national airwaves. Producers for Britain's Channel 4 somehow convinced Heston Blumenthal, the country's most exalted

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and imaginative chef—his acclaimed Fat Duck restaurant outside London has won three Michelin stars for such outlandish dishes as snail porridge and bacon-and-egg ice cream—to give their down-at-the-heels Popham branch a makeover. If the experiment succeeded, they'd roll it out companywide. At the very least, it'd make good television.

"They said, 'Please, can you not do any research?'" recalls the stocky Blumenthal, in his usual chef whites, when I catch up with him at the Hinds Head, the classic pub he runs across the street from the Fat Duck in Bray. "I hadn't set foot in a Little Chef in twenty years. As I got more immersed in it, I realized the enormity of the project."

Throughout Europe, star chefs are increasingly putting their stamp on mass-market cuisine. Jamie Oliver is reinventing school lunches, Ferran Adrià is dabbling in fast food, and Joël Robuchon is putting out canned soups and sauces. The Little Chef experiment is Blumenthal's way of joining in.

After the Popham store makeover, someone called asking if the airfield was nearby—he wanted to fly in for lunch.

Big Chef Takes On Little Chef aired last January. On the pilot, Blumenthal had to come to grips with a kitchen without pots or pans—just a griddle, a deep fryer and a microwave. The kitchen staff was painfully unskilled. The dining room

was an embarrassing mess, with ripped seats, peeling paint and stained carpets. Ian Pegler, the financial executive enlisted to bring the chain back from the brink (and a dead ringer for the Little Chef mascot) seemed to be looking to Blumenthal to pull off a miracle.

"There's the world of cooking—my world," says Blumenthal, "and then there's Little Chef. It's a different industry. The fact that they both produce food is amazing.

"But look, sometimes I will eat a ready-made meal," he adds. "And I definitely appreciate the difference between a really good one and a bad one."

By the third episode, the project looked to be on the verge of collapse. Blumenthal and Pegler were butting heads, and the chef seemed to fear the whole scheme was nothing more than a publicity stunt. "He didn't trust me," recalls Pegler, sitting in a booth at the Popham Little Chef. "But he didn't know me. And every time we'd meet we'd have a camera or a microphone somewhere

between us." Nonetheless, at the very last minute, the new Blumenthal menu made its splashy debut.

The Popham Little Chef was thoroughly remodeled and now boasts a spiffy new dining room with shiny



NOT-SO-FAST FOOD Scottish mussels with toast points, from the new menu

white tiles and red-apple banquettes courtesy of a Blumenthal pal, designer Ab Rogers, whose work would normally be beyond the franchise's reach. But the bigger change is what's on the plates. The eggs are now free-range, the ground beef organic; there are fresh herbs on the chicken and Belgian chocolate in the pudding. There are enough signature Blumenthal flourishes—the trifle with Pop Rocks, for instance, and a fish-and-chips plate served with an atomizer that unleashes chip-shop aromas (really pickled onion juice)—that there's no

CLASSING UP THE JOINT The forlorn old Popham shop, left, and the spiffy Ab Rogers update





THE LITTLE CHEF THAT COULD Popham suddenly became the hottest spot in the middle of nowhere.

doubt the chef has left his mark.

Still, it's clearly not the Fat Duck, where a 13-course tasting menu will set you back £150 a head. Far from it. Most dishes remain under £10, and to ensure chainwide consistency, the dishes, based on Blumenthal recipes, are prepared by food packagers and reheated to order in hot water (a variation on the *sous-vide* technique used by high-end restaurants).

Nonetheless, shortly after the program aired, the Popham restaurant became the hottest spot in the middle of nowhere. The restaurant, which doesn't take reservations, began getting calls from people looking to make one. Celebrities popped in. "One day in the same lunch hour," says Blumenthal, "you had pop star Suzi Quatro, Eric Clapton and the bloke who played Doctor Who all queuing up for a table." One fellow called asking how far the restaurant was from the local airfield—it's directly across the street—because he was planning to fly in for lunch. "For three or four months, business was up eight hundred percent," Pegler says.

Though the frenzy has subsided somewhat, aftershocks continue. Little Chef plans to transform five more branches in the next year. Blumenthal, who may soon shoot a new program building on the *Big Chef* premise

(working title: *Michelin Impossible*) in which he tackles other big projects, is in discussions with a grocery chain to develop his own line of packaged meals. Little Chef, in the end, may help sustain the Fat Duck, his very tiny and exorbitant-to-operate flagship restaurant, which employs a staff of around 75 to serve just 44 diners.

"There comes a point," the chef allows with a smile, "you've got to try and get some level of financial security." ■

JAY CHESHES has covered star chefs for *Fortune* and *W*. He'd happily devour anything Heston Blumenthal cooked.

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