



Emma Parker

A history of street food

I would like to take you on a tour of London's food through the ages. We will start at the oldest market in London, Borough and end at one of the newest, Maltby Street. We often think of street food as a modern phenomenon created at music festivals where hipsters buy buffalo burgers and posh sausages. We can however trace its history back to the Romans and their street sellers, also known as costermongers.

It is at London's markets that you can enjoy one of the oldest street foods – oysters. Oysters occur naturally in the estuaries around England, but it was the Romans who created the oyster beds and introduced us to this delicacy. Some of the best oysters in the UK come from a small island off the coast of Essex called Mersea. The Romans had their capital at Colchester at this time and so set up the oyster beds nearby. I consider this to be

Borough Market is the mother of all food markets. Oysterman Richard Haward brings the delights of the Essex coast to London where he sells oysters from Mersea Island. If you can't carry them home, they can also be delivered to you.

an almost perfect street food – it comes in its own natural container; you open it with a sharp stone or knife and then it has its own half shell as a little dish in which to serve it!

Street sellers were vital in supplying food to Londoners. They became particularly important as the population of London grew exponentially in the 19th century. It is estimated that there were 30,000-40,000 street sellers including muffin men,

pie men, shrimp girls, and oyster sellers feeding London at this time.

If you happen to stand on the corner of Stoney Street and Park Street, look up at Borough Market building. The silver building in front of you has some interesting pineapples on its roof. This building used to be part of the old Floral Hall, which was in the old fruit and vegetable market in Covent Garden. When the Covent Garden Opera House was refurbished in the 1990s, they moved part of the hall to Borough Market. When pineapples were first introduced into England in the 17th century, they were considered the caviar of their day and they became a status symbol.

As you wander through Borough Market and onto London Bridge, you can appreciate that this was one of London's main thoroughfares. In fact, for nearly 17 centuries it was the only way over the river



“Costermongers were a lifeline to London and provided Londoners with much of their food over the years.”

The George Inn is a great place to stop for a well-earned drink.
www.george-southwark.co.uk

and into the City of London. Imagine this area filled with people trying to get across the bridge, fighting their way through the crowds of other travellers and costermongers selling their wares. London Bridge was locked at night, which meant people often needed accommodation. This area became filled with inns and pubs serving those who dared not go back out of London because of the risk of thieves and robbers that lay along the dark sections of road.

Walk south down Borough High Street and you will notice that there are many little yards truncating the main road. These yards, including Kings Head Yard and White Hart Yard, were once the site of inns. In fact, the pubs and inns in this area were very important in serving weary travellers. The George Inn is London's only remaining galleried inn in an area that would have been filled with places to stay, rest and eat. The George Inn dates from 1677, but there has been an inn on the same site since at least 1522. The original building was big, taking 80 coaches per week in its heyday. Shakespeare knew the inn well and would have put on plays here

in the courtyard. The inn would have formed a three-sided building with balconies on each side creating an internal yard. The yard was perfect for performing plays especially on Feast Days, Christmas and Easter. The rich would look down from the balconies and the poor would gather in the courtyard around the action. The noise from the street sellers and the drunken crowd would have meant that the people in the balconies probably missed much of the action. Costermongers would have brought around such delights as hot sheep's feet, hot codlings (apples wrapped in pastry), pies, shrimps, whelks and hot eels.

The next stop is Maltby Street, which is about 15-minute walk away from Borough Market. Walking along St Thomas Street, you will see the extent of the new London Bridge station and also be amazed at the height of The Shard. As you near Bermondsey Street, you might notice Vinegar Yard; this is a nod to the nearby Sarsons's vinegar factory, which would

have spewed acrid fumes into the air. As you walk around the corner into Bermondsey Street, enjoy the variety of wonderful places to eat and drink and maybe stop a while at The Fashion & Textile Museum. Again, keep an eye out for the building and road names, which remind us that this area was also filled with tanneries and wool weavers.

As we cross Tower Bridge Road and walk along Maltby Street Market, it is difficult to believe that this market was only founded in 2010. It offers plenty of places to sit and have some food, a drink and the opportunity to watch the local action. The food available is eclectic among which are juicy steak sandwiches, delicious falafel, and waffles with streaky bacon and maple syrup.

The rise of modern street food is a phenomenon that doesn't look like ending any time soon. Currently, London has the largest number of markets of any city in the world and has clearly remained in love with quirky market stalls and street food vendors.

Maltby Street Market is open Saturdays and Sundays. See www.maltby.st for details. 40 Maltby Street is a delightful and relaxed eatery for those who prefer to dine inside.
www.40maltbystreet.com



Emma Parker creates and leads a series of tours of London including The Secret History of Street Food and East End Eats, www.coutours.co.uk. Contact Emma on 0208 6345667 or Emma@coutours.co.uk.