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The story of Belgian frites

Chips have permeated into every pore of Belgian culture from its pop art and comic strips to music and advertising. They form half of the national dish along with a pot of mussels and are a national symbol with political punch.



Say the word potato and the Irish Potato Famine of 1845 and the fact that the tubers originated in South America comes to mind. But chop them up, drop them in a vat of simmering oil, add a touch of salt and you've got a whole new ball-game.



Call them Freedom Fries in-flight on Air Force One, Patates Kizartmasi in an Istanbul Café, Gamza Teekim on the streets of Seoul or Ranskalaiset Perunat sitting on a bench in Helsinki – the 'chip' or 'French fry' has gone a long way in putting the Kingdom of Belgium on the map... culinary or other.

"Fry ban targets wrong country," went a Reuters headline at the height of the French product boycott in the US following its stance against the Iraqi conflict. Often mistaken as French in origin, the word "french" became synonymous with the product due to the fact that, in old English, to "french" was to "cut lengthwise". Hence, the French fry.

"We modest Belgians don't mind the French claim because we know that fries are God's gift to our people," exclaims a website completely dedicated to the art form of Belgian chip making.

Chips have permeated into every pore of Belgian culture from its pop art and comic strips to music and advertising. They form half of the national dish along with a pot of mussels and are certain to ensure the economic return on Belgian potatoes (bintjes) for eons to come.

The first fry

What we recognise today as the Belgian "frite" or "friet" is thought to have originated in the Meuse region in the year 1680. The poor inhabitants of the Meuse valley area subsisted mainly on fish, but when the river Meuse froze in 1680, potatoes were cut into the shape of fish, fried and used as a substitute to their main staple – or so the story goes.

There has been much disagreement over the fact as the region lies in the heart of French-speaking Wallonia, forcing Flanders to desperately seek a Flemish origin to the food.

But, as in most countries, food can define culture and, in Belgium, the chip is generally accepted as a unifying force and thoroughly "Belgian" – francophone or not.

Chips are thought to have arrived in the US in the late 1700s when Thomas Jefferson brought the method back to the colonies. I'm guessing it's the method he brought back and not a soggy bag of chips.

In the UK, the first chip is believed to have materialised at Dundee Market in the 1870s, traded by a Belgian immigrant named Edward De Gernier.

...and mayonnaise

As for the Belgian chip add-on essential, mayonnaise, its origin is cloudy. One theory connects it to the harbour town of Mahon, liberated by Cardinal Richelieu from the English. The towns of Bayonne and Mayon however also claim the golden morsels as their own.

"Belgium is beer, cartoons (BD), mussels, chips and the Royal family," one fietkot owner tells me.

Frites have essentially become a national symbol sold out of caravans and shacks and chalets, fried twice (trade secret), dash of salt, glob of mayonnaise, a little plastic fork and hey presto.

The idea has been exported to New York in recent years and, as the song goes, if a chip can make it there it can make it anywhere.

B-Frites was opened a stone's throw from Times Square by three friends – Skel Islamaj from Schaerbeek, Annik Lamin from Louvain and Omer Ipek from Saint Josse in Brussels and have known enormous success since their opening.

Lest we forget though that there are many levels of Belgian chip-eatery – not all of them are handed over a greasy counter in an off-white paper cone by a burley chip-van owner in Anderlecht. Only last week I scanned a menu and noticed filet mignon served with a chiffoné of pommes frites, if you please.

"The chip is essentially regarded in Belgium as a culture, social strata and gender bridge: soul food," says Paul Ilegems, curator of the Belgium Chip Museum on the second floor of Fietkot Max on Antwerp's Groenplaats.

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"What would Belgium be without chips?" he asks in the pages of "Het Belgisch Fritetenboek", "Just a grayish zone, an insignificant stain on the globe, deprived of any personality."

A bit harsh perhaps but it's obviously clear that this chip thing is serious stuff in TinTin Land.

The chip has come a long way since its fishy origins and have mutated to fit each culture they have come to court – newspaper-stained and doused in salt and vinegar in Birmingham; cooked in peanut oil and served in a basket of palm leaves in Borneo.

But they remain Belgian through and through while encouraging Breughel-belly across the globe.

Although the US may not have known it, they were killing two birds with one stone when they boycotted French Fries – made a point to the French, rejected a Belgian product... now all they have to find is something German and a sprinkle of Mexican about them and the chip boycott would have been the coup of the century.

Who would have guessed the political power of potatoes?

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