

## The Humble Kebab: An Unlikely Tool for Unity

Picture this: it is one in the morning and you have gorged yourself on 3 for £5 jagerbombs and an absurd amount of the local IPA. Finally stumbling out of the hallowed halls of Spoons, your stomach growls for something spicy and savoury, perhaps an absurd nightcap for the non-Brits among us. As you hike up the high street, breathless and ready for bed, you spot something out of the corner of your eye. Basked in a greasy, toxic light, it sings to you. You enter with confidence; the Turkish owner gives a toothy smile as he prepares your near-daily order of Shawarma and Chips, with the theme tune of James Bond (always and exclusively Bond) playing softly in the background. You have found it again, the holy grail for hungry school children, drunken nights out and even the homeless of Britain; The Kebab Shop.

With over 20,000 kebab shops across the UK (London Calling, 2018), the Kebab is widely considered the epitome of modern British society. Its proliferation, however, begs important questions; how has a Turkish delicacy become ubiquitous in a very English society? Is the Kebab really even a Turkish symbol, or has it morphed into one of multiculturalism?

Whilst the Fish and Chip fanatics were invading the small villages and hills, the UK was experiencing an alternative yearning for an exotic, fast food alternative. The Kebab provided the perfect solution because it not only appealed to the British palate, it amplified these rudimentary ingredients. The British diet is mostly comprised of meat and bread- quite literally, the celebration of comfort eating. Thus, there was a perhaps subconscious need for exotic zing in our palates. As the famous food writer Nigel Slater once described, we were “a nation in need of a big, warm hug” (Slater, 2005). And, the Kebab did not just deliver this “hug”, it overwhelmed us with it. The Kebab took the need for simple meat, and replaced it with extravagantly spiced lamb. It amplified toast, transforming it into lusciously soft sesame-topped Roti (Williams, 2017). It was a new mouth-watering melange of the basic ingredients we already loved, that set more taste buds alight than any battered cod could ever aspire to.

Thus, the reason we welcomed the Kebab with such panache is because it projected and amplified our culinary needs. Nevertheless, many have begun to suggest that our food flavour preferences (which led to our love and embracement of the Kebab) have irreversibly altered the recipe, maybe even beyond the point of authenticity.

Arguably, the Kebab Shop can no longer be considered a Turkish contribution because it has been transformed to fit the British palate. The Kebab was invented to be fuel to the common labourer, a simple construction of ingredients as we have seen above. All this changed once the Kebab landed on gloomy British soil in the 1940s. Slowly, the Kebab shop became bastardized. The traditional Roomali Roti bread was instead swapped for a tortilla. The scrumptious lamb began to be wrapped in bacon (avant-garde pigs-in-blanket I guess?). Though, in my humble opinion, a scandal, this reworked “kebab” even won the category of Best Newcomer in the famed British Kebab Awards (Wood, *The Caterer*, 2019). This means that, despite being so far detached from their Turkish counterparts, these parodies have successfully re-appropriated the name of the Doner Kebab, and more widely the Anglo-Turkish culinary scene as a whole. Hence, many argue that this mass adulteration means that it cannot be the cultural origin of the Kebab that allows it to translate well into English society. In fact, Turks have been so appalled by British Kebabs that they describe them as “spinning trunks of unknown meat and dripping grease” (Hill, 2015). After all, it is, unironically, British; the flavours we altered when adopting it into our culture are what appeals to us, and what has ingrained the Kebab Shop in our lives. However, does changing a topping or ingredient really make the Kebab inauthentic?

In some ways, the UK is living up to its imperial past. It has colonised foreign plates because we kebab-consumers have changed the elements of the recipe. What Henry Notaker argues in his analysis of imported plates is that when we adapt dishes across borders, ingredients important to the original culture are lost. Instead of belonging to the home nation, they are now party to “a globalized food culture” (Notaker, 2018). In other words, the UK is a steamroller that homogenises any food that enters its culinary sphere. However, I’d argue that

annihilation is a far cry from integration. In my opinion, changing the type of bread used does not strip the Kebab of their cultural traditions. Rather, it is a superficial “Britishisation” that should be celebrated as a component of globalisation. I think it is extremely difficult to embrace a food entirely in its original form- there will always be a natural affinity that will alter ingredients slightly. For example, the Roti bread is too heavy for the health-conscious Gen Z youth, so they opt for a lighter tortilla version. Claiming that this adapted kebab no longer belongs to Turkey is extremely problematic- it suggests all objects of cultural adaptation are inauthentic. Even though I may be disgusted by the sight of it, the lamb-bacon burritobab is still Turkish, and it wouldn’t be the popular British staple it is today if it hadn’t been adjusted for our tastes.

However, some argue that the British people should instead adapt their tastes for new cultural plates, because they are the ones receiving this cultural object. In fact, The New Statesman’s Felicity Cloake argued that nations have already altered their tastes, when they were first affronted with the global propagation of cuisine. She grounded her argument in the example of 19<sup>th</sup> century Japan, where a typical meal consisted of “some rough grains accompanied by something like shredded yam leaves”. Now, Japan is widely considered a gastronomic capital, with some of the most refined and advanced culinary habits globally. How did this occur? She argues that claims that at the same time they were opening their borders to the world, they were also opening their mouths to a plethora of new flavours and foods (Cloake, 2016). I believe the British people have already adapted their tastes for the Kebab, otherwise there is no way it would have been welcomed and appreciated like it is today. However, it is evident there has also been a refurbishment of some traits of the Kebab to better fit the British gusto. This I would put down to a refinement to a more culturally-appropriate form, not necessarily a complete change of the taste of the Kebab in order to appeal to us Brits.

But there’s a darker implication to this adaptation to fit our palates. As a result of the Kebab changing for us, and thus not us for the Kebab, we are further entrenching Turkey as

the less powerful player in our relationship. Marwan Kraidy explored this concept of power flows in food assimilation in her thesis. She found that, conventionally, the foodstuff from the less developed nation changes to engage the taste buds of the receiving, more developed nation. Essentially, the political power asymmetry is being reinforced by the culinary dynamic. This plate that we celebrate as the culmination of migrant empowerment is, in reality, solidifying Britain's position as a world leader. Consequently, we should only eat the authentic kebab, that represents only the culture of Turkey, right? Yet, this leads to an even more difficult question: what even is an authentic Kebab?

Indeed, some say that we cannot discern a distinct point where an object is authentic, because globalisation makes hybridity inevitable in each and every cultural object. Peter Van Der Peer in his article 'Hybridity and Authenticity in the Global Space', argues that there has been an "erosion of original cultures" that has given way to a new global space where all cultures are inextricably linked. By this he means, we cannot divide the toothy Turkish vendors from the hipster English chefs, nor the traditional street car kebab from the award-winning burritobab, because, despite how inauthentic or authentic they may seem, they are influenced by each other. Essentially, there is no possible divide between authentic and hybrid objects. This leads us to a deeper critique of our attempts at maintaining authenticity- is it an inherently an ethno-centric perspective? In my opinion, it is undeniable that all cultural objects are by some means hybrid, especially in this contemporary age of globalisation. However, there are certain traits that I believe should remain 'authentic', in order to maintain appeal - for instance, the multi-cultural dining experience for the Kebab. Rather than a distinct boundary between authenticity and hybridity, authenticity can be found in certain traits, which often are the ones that appeal to foreign populations (aka us).

One of these traits that appeals to us is the Kebab's capability to resist the harsh class system in Britain, because it can be individualistically crafted by the Kebab vendor. Brought over by migrants in the mid 1930s, the traditional Turkish meal is a testament to immigrant's ability to flourish in new countries. Living in what our leaders want to be a homogenous

society, I believe us Brits pick the Kebab shop because it indulges our desire to break class hierarchies and catalyses the burgeoning of multi-culturalism. This can be demonstrated in the way in which no two kebab shops are created equal. Each charming Kebabi crafts his own style, with his own ingredients. Order the Shish Kebab, for instance, and you'd get a "heap of charcoal-grilled lamb chopped into cubes" in one establishment, or a "skewer of beef mixed with paprika and chilli flakes" in another (Arikoglu, 2018). By picking the unique Kebab over, say, Fish and Chips, we aid the triumph of cultural exchange over the ubiquity of ethno-nationalism. Thus, the distinct individualism of each Kebab rebels against the class campaigns of Boris Johnson and his cronies. It allows us to break the social pecking order without outright declaring it- in some ways, a very James Bond-esque manoeuvre. The Kebab empowers the minority.

Here, some may object saying the Kebab reinforces the class system, because it entails an exchange between an individual with enough disposable income to afford a drunken night out and a migrant who has no choice but to sell Kebabs. Take Professor Njaya at Zimbabwe University, who claims that by buying street foods like the Kebab we are reinforcing the service-based economy and disenfranchising food vendors. In her opinion, street food vending creates an "alternative street economy that may be a hindrance to social progress" (Njaya, 2014). This would mean that we should not be eating Kebabs, because they entrench the migrant minority in a cycle of poverty. Although I agree that this exchange does, in part, reinforce the triumph of the titans, it is better than the illegal work these migrants are often forced to do. In other words, I believe that the Kebab industry at least provides a legitimate career, a rarity for many migrants. If we were to boycott the Kebab on the basis of its classist nature, we would be eliminating a legal source of income for migrants, worsening the situation we thought we were remedying. Fortunately, this movement has not caught on with the British population (whether it be for my reasoning, or because they just love the kebab too much to give it up), and thus hasn't adversely affected the translation of the food into our society.

On the other hand, this empowerment has thrown the shop into the identity politics game. The Kebab has evolved into a symbol of rampant Islamization, because Turkey is predominantly a Muslim nation. Take the EU, a seemingly liberal institution, that has begun to discuss Kebab crackdowns because of the vast propagation of this Muslim delicacy. Theoretically, in the UK, the ban limits the phosphate content of the lamb, because it is extremely fatty (Wood, *The Express*, 2017). However, the fact it will only be applied to high street Kebab Shops, not anywhere else the meat is sold, is telling of a deeper reason. It is a terribly veiled attempt to hinder Islamic expression. Hence, we can see that this fear of Islamic culture has plagued the installation of the Kebab in British culture. The Kebab is beginning to fail to translate well, as it is being forced to represent the sinister side of immigration which it did not intend to (it was just a basic, good Turkish meal). And this is not just a pseudo-Islamophobic food ban; the prevention of Kebab sales damages the social standing of migrants as a whole, fuelling divisiveness in British society.

Yet, there is also a Kebab for those who are staunchly anti-immigration, because it exists in a plethora of culinary experiences. Since its naissance as a hole-in-the-wall, the Kebab has expanded to many other restaurant establishments. Don't get me wrong, it will always be home in the rusted streetcars of Zone 5. However, the Kebab can now be found in [uptight] sit-down restaurants and [bougee] hipster cafes. For example, if you happen to be uncomfortable with the Islamic origin, you can visit the Michelin-starred Yeni for a less-evidently Turkish kebab (Nunn, 2019). Supposedly, this is a Turkish meal, albeit a sanitised version. However, I believe that a Michelin-starred restaurant eliminates the multi-cultural experience. At this point, it is no longer the Kebab that first arrived in our nation; the greasy fingers and James Bond (of course!) soundtrack are completely necessary components of the Kebab experience. The way the kebab has completely "cleansed" itself for Xenophobes has repositioned the Kebab too far from its origin – in terms of the experience of consuming the food itself. It has lost the attraction that brought it over.

By contrast, it is the Kebab shop that fosters community that attracted us, because it unifies us in the face of divide. Especially in the inharmonious atmosphere of British politics (with the 2016 Brexit referendum), the need for a place that makes everyone feel at home is exacerbated. The Kebab shop embodies this spirit of welcoming, attracting people from all walks of life. Imagine yourself in Sevenoaks, in my local favourite Marmaris Kebab. At 8am, you will find the charming AI gifting free soft drinks to already hyper schoolchildren. At noon, the stooped elderly arrives, in need of their pre-siesta fix. At 12pm, you will find the garish youth, singing (or shouting, depends how you see it) along with the rest of the midnight-snackers. In all of its grimy glory, it is the sight of eating Shawarma together that we love. The Kebab shop that welcomes, instead of sanitises, is the British favourite. The Kebab shop has translated so well that it has become the gastronomic home for community- a position I believe will only be reinforced as the UK drifts further and further apart.

So, what does this all mean? It means that you should lace up your shoes, google the nearest kebab shop and prepare your body for the best meal of its life. Despite being proof of Islamization to some, the kebab is a window into contemporary inequalities, and an unusual tool to break class hierarchies. Essentially, the kebab is much more than a foodie favourite- it is a physical representation of globalisation. It will be interesting to see whether its worldwide propagation will tip into cultural homogenisation- will the kebab morph with other popular cuisines in the UK, or join the 'global food culture'? Never mind what the future holds, "the kebab shop is the light that never goes out" (Bronte, 2018), and it will remain steadfast in the streets and stomachs of the British public.

## Bibliography

- Aguilar, A. (2020, September 28). Peer Review. (M. Jarvis, Interviewer)
- Arikoglu, L. (2018, October 1). *Conde Nast Traveller*. Retrieved September 26, 2020, from A Love Letter to the Doner Kebab: <https://www.cntraveler.com/story/a-love-letter-to-the-doner-kebab>
- Bronte, G. (2018, March 13). *Big Hospitality*. Retrieved September 28, 2020, from British Kebab Awards 2018 Winners: <https://www.bighospitality.co.uk/Article/2018/03/13/The-kebab-shop-is-the-light-that-never-goes-out-the-British-Kebab-Awards-2018-winners-are-announced>
- Cloake, F. (2016, February 3). *Why do we like the foods we like - and can we change our taste?* Retrieved October 22, 2020, from The New Statesman: <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/food-drink/2016/02/why-do-we-foods-we-and-can-we-change-our-taste>
- Hill, A. (2015, August 13). *UNILAD*. Retrieved September 28, 2020, from Guy absolutely nails what British Kebab Shops are like: <https://www.unilad.co.uk/news/canadian-guy-absolutely-nails-what-british-kebab-shops-are-like/>
- London Calling. (2018, June 23). *Culture Calling Magazine*. Retrieved September 26, 2020, from The UK's Best Kebab Shops: <https://www.culturecalling.com/uk/features/the-uks-best-kebab-shops#:~:text=With%20an%20estimated%201.3%20million,and%20chicken%20doner%20a%20week.>
- Njaya, T. (2014, March). Operations of Street Food Vendors and Their Impact on Sustainable Urban Life in High Density Suburbs. *Asian Journal of Economic Modelling*, 2, 18-31.
- Notaker, H. (2018). Adaptation of dishes crossing frontiers. *Food Anthropology Journal*, 12, 46.
- Nunn, J. (2019, March 14). *Eater London*. Retrieved September 28, 2020, from Where to find the best Turkish food in London.
- Slater, N. (2005). *Toast*. London, UK: Avery Publishing Group.
- Williams, M. (2017, February 26). *The Daily Echo*. Retrieved September 26, 2020, from Sheesh, who'd have thought it: why the kebab is now king of the high street: <https://www.dailyecho.co.uk/news/15118266.amp/>
- Wood, V. (2017, December 2). *The Express*. Retrieved September 26, 2020, from End of the Kebab: Takeaway owners furious at EU crackdown: <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/887017/EU-ban-European-Union-Kebab-Turkey-fast-food-takeaway-justeat>
- Wood, V. (2019, March 19). *The Caterer*. Retrieved September 19, 2020, from British Kebab Awards Winners 2019 announced at glitzy Westminster ceremony: <https://www.thecaterer.com/news/restaurant/british-kebab-awards-2019-winners-announced-at-glitzy-westminster-ceremony>