

Britain's only chip critic: 'I want the right to stick in the knife, as well as the fork'

For more than a decade, Graham Young has been reviewing chip shops for the Birmingham Mail. As he celebrates his 500th portion, he explains what makes a good chip, why it's time to stop demonising our national food – and how to spot a good chippie.

The in-car scales are perched on the dashboard and Graham Young is ready for his latest consignment. We are parked alongside a row of 1970s lock-up garages in an unmade, dead-end road off Dogpool Lane in south Birmingham. It is a secluded spot, and the sunlight is fading; it is ideal for Young's particular style of covert work. His cover has not been blown in 10 years, remarkable when you consider his only disguise is a blue beanie hat that he turns inside out. "It's 100% acrylic. I bought it at Poundland," he reveals.

We have a few minutes before Young's latest purchase. Experience suggests it will weigh 300 to 400 grams and once he has got it in his hands we need to move fast. Young, a veteran reporter on the Birmingham Mail, is thought to be the UK's – possibly the world's – only chip reviewer. His editors were unconvinced when he floated the idea for a weekly "Cheap as Chips" column but he finally got approval in 2005. More than a decade on, this chip critic extraordinaire has passed a fried-potato milestone: his 500th review. "What could be more important than reviewing Britain's national dish," he asks. But why doesn't he also review the fish? Why just the chips? "If they can't get the chips right, there's no point trying anything else."

A methodology had to be constructed for the uncharted territory of chip criticism. Hence the in-car scales, a temperature probe and other adaptations to the "chipmobile", a family saloon whose fabric is imbued with the aroma of Young's past work. He fastidiously weighs each purchase to check value for money. "I started weighing them because it is a lottery when it comes to how many chips you get," he points out. "If you go to a petrol station, you get a gallon of petrol. If you go for a beer, you get a pint. But when you get chips you have no idea how many you are going to get." Young's statistical analysis is recorded in pencil in a ledger. It looks like a football writer's notebook from the 1950s. The majority of the reviews take place in Birmingham but he does venture into Solihull and the Black Country. There are occasional "Chips on Tour" reviews for holiday spots frequented by Brummies, such as Weston-super-Mare and Blackpool.

Birmingham is in the midst of a culinary love-in, much to the delight of the city's marketing executives who typically hail Brum's Michelin-approved dining scene and its hipster street food. Great chippies do not feature. It is a missed opportunity. I live in Birmingham and have reported on its restaurants for a decade. Young, perhaps unsurprisingly, is in agreement. He is fiercely proud of his working-class roots in Blackburn, where his father Bernard was a plasterer/builder and his mother Florence was a weaver at the mills. Young thinks the food-trend flunkies overlook the nation's chip DNA at their peril.

There is another reason for Young's passion for chippies. "As a kid," he explains, "I would work with my dad in the school holidays and we would go to different chippies in Blackburn. That must have fostered this wanderlust for chips. What could be better than having chips with your dad? I lost my dad in 1985 and I had this idea to start writing about chips. Every time I go and have chips it reminds me of my dad. Because he died so young, I didn't have time to go to pubs with him. But we went to chippies."

Young is sitting in the driver's seat with the window down. He suddenly interrupts our conversation. "It's time. The chips are ready. I caught the scent of them on the breeze a few minutes ago," he says. We're at Dad's Lane Fish Bar, owned by Pedro Petrou and resplendent with its bright blue fascia and yellow lettering. Tea-time trade is brisk. The fish includes plaice, hake, cod, salmon, butterfly prawns and swordfish. There are sausages and saveloys, meat pies and a Pukka steak and kidney pudding. Young queues for his cone of chips (£1.40) then slips away - he's careful to remain incognito when he's in the zone (his byline picture accompanies the column but he hasn't been busted in line so far). "I don't want people to know who I am," he explains. "I want to be totally honest in my reviews ... I want the reader to think: 'Yeah, he knows his chips.' And I want to reserve the right to stick in the knife, as well as the fork."

Back in the Chipmobile, Young waits expectantly as the needle on the "chip-o-meter," a cooking thermometer, starts to rise. He skewers several chips on the probe to get a solid reading. The temperature hits 75C, all the more astonishing, apparently, because the chips were served in an open tray rather than wrapped: "My guess is that they might have been 80C. Very impressive." The scales reveal the weight: a whopping 400g. But what of the flavour? "Fantastic," declares Young. "They are nice and fluffy on the inside, in their own little jacket. They are good potatoes, Maris Piper. The shop presentation is spotless. They have cleared up after lunch. Great staff, really smart and friendly. I will give them five stars."

Which brings us, inevitably, to the thorny issue of what makes a great chip. “There are different types of great chips,” says Young. “Chips can be relatively soggy and amazing, dry and amazing, soft and amazing ... The key is the quality of the potato you start with. Maris Piper is the best. There has got to be that magical flavour ... The worst chips of all are tainted chips that have been cooked in stale oil. It happens if the oil has been flogged to death or not filtered. It could also be because other foods have been cooked in the same oil. That is catastrophic for a chip.”

Young has suffered for his craft. He has eaten yellow chips, white chips, green chips, black chips and, on one memorable occasion, Day-Glo orange chips: “My 65p cone weighed in at 200g on my in-car scales, but the chips looked so alien I could barely stomach one, for research purposes only.”

“Now, where did I put my Geiger counter?” concluded his zero-star report.

“I have been to some real dives but you always hope you will uncover a gem,” says Young as we polish off the Dad’s Lane chips. “Chips have been demonised for so long. But they can give you that feelgood factor that no other food can.”

Although Young is convinced chips have mood-lifting properties – a potato Prozac, if you will – he concedes they probably aren’t the healthiest of foods. He plans to use his comprehensive data to calculate the average weight of a serving and will reveal all for a landmark review, maybe his 1,000th column. “It will be the ultimate exclusive,” he says. The nation’s chip laureate is no fan of the nanny state but he cautions against eating Bunteresque portions. “Some people clearly eat too much,” he points out. “I have always believed in moderation. I think a balanced diet is important. I only have chips once a week and if they are crap, I don’t eat many at all.”

Six of the best: a critic’s top tips for a perfect chippie

1 Customer service: look for happy, smiling, well-presented servers with good product knowledge and a willingness to cook to order.

2 Opening hours: there should be separate lunch and tea-time/evening opening hours rather than “all day” frying from 11am till midnight – and relatively restricted menu options.

3 Showmanship: seek out “chip shop gunslingers” who squirt the vinegar bottle with one hand while shaking the salt cellar with the other. A dying art. (See 5.)

4 Follow your nose: bad chippies emit a dense, stale odour that sticks to your clothing like invisible glue. The smell of a good chippie is harder to describe and is “akin to the ozone effect at the seaside”. The scent of fresh chips should stimulate your appetite.

5 Innovations: the hallmark of a dedicated chippie. Young recalls a Blackburn shop boss who developed a “hands-free” vinegar squirter from a converted showerhead and foot pump.

6 Spick and span: the shop should be as clean on the outside as the inside. When Young complained about grass growing in cracked paving, the owner insisted it was the council’s responsibility: “My mother used to scrub the doorstep and sweep the path. It’s about pride.”