

Brick Lane, Curry and Covid-19



Brick Lane in London is one of the world's most iconic streets. Representations through literature, film and its reputation as the UK's 'Curry Capital' have all contributed to its status, so much so that some British Bangladeshis claim that 'There are three Bengals – west Bengal, east Bengal and Brick Lane'. Nevertheless, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Lane have been considerable. Seán Carey looks at the restaurant sector in particular, which is under threat as city workers and international tourists are both in short supply.

'It's good to be open again because [Brick Lane](#) without business is not Brick Lane', is how one Bangladeshi restaurateur summed up his feelings now that his and other businesses had reopened for dine-in customers after five months of closure. Nevertheless, with the prospect of a prolonged absence of City workers and international tourists, there is some trepidation about the area's prospects. 'Maybe it will take a couple of years to get back to normal,' he says. 'That's what we are thinking anyhow.'

'We' is a category composed of the owners of 20 curry venues — 16 restaurants and four cafés located on the lane. All eateries except one are owned by Bangladeshis, many of who were born in Sylhet but have spent most of their lives in the UK. Before the first lockdown in March 2020, there were two more curry restaurants, but during the pandemic, one has been transformed into a fish and cocktail venue (under new ownership) while the other has repositioned itself as a Thai restaurant.

All the Bangladeshi-owned curry restaurants and cafés, sweets shops and grocery stores selling fish, halal meat and a vast range of spices are located in the southern end of Brick Lane. For that reason, it is understandable why visitors (and journalists) are apt to divide the street into two distinct segments — 'Bangladeshi Brick Lane' and, because of the proliferation of vintage clothes stores, independent coffee shops and other fashionable venues in the northern end, 'hipster Brick Lane'. Nevertheless, there are many Bangladeshi-owned businesses in the northern section. They include a mainstream convenience store, a picture-framing service, some trendy bars and, reflecting an imperial legacy, an upmarket tea emporium, the [London Tea Exchange](#).

[The UK curry sector is estimated to be worth £3.5 billion annually](#). It is composed of around 10,000 restaurants and takeaways, of which 80% are owned by British Bangladeshis; and Brick Lane has played a pivotal role in the development of this sector. Until a few years ago there were several recruitment agencies on its side streets providing labour for the nation's widely-dispersed curry houses. Owners paid a small fee to an agency for the services of kitchen and front-of-house staff. Now social media (especially Facebook) has replaced the requirement for geographically-located recruitment offices. But the reason why these agencies were located in the area is that the [London Borough of Tower Hamlets](#) is home to the largest concentration of Bangladeshis in the UK. Furthermore, it remains the case that many young and not so young British Bangladeshi men, while having homes in Tower Hamlets, continue to make their livelihoods outside the capital.



Bangladeshi restaurants in Brick Lane. © See below.

Some curry sector experts like Bashir Ahmed, President of the [British Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce & Industry \(BBCCI\)](#), predict that because of pressures unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic, around a third of the UK's high street curry houses and takeaways could close soon. The curry sector has, in any case, faced a variety of long-standing and well-aided challenges — a shortage of skilled labour, especially kitchen staff, because of ever-tightening immigration rules; the reluctance of young British Bangladeshis, male or female, to imagine their futures in hospitality; and the proliferation of new types of other Asian cuisines — Korean, Thai, Vietnamese — perceived as 'healthier' and 'lighter' by younger consumers in particular.

A decade ago, nearly 70 curry restaurants and cafés operated in Brick Lane and the surrounding area. The dwindling number of venues can be explained by a range of factors — decline in lunchtime trade, restrictions on the night-time economy and the proliferation of new fast-casual, ethnically diverse eateries as well as high-end venues, some boasting Michelin stars, in the greater Shoreditch area (around Brick Lane). The food scene on the eastern and northern City fringe in particular has extended geographically at the same time as the types of cuisines on offer at different price points have multiplied hugely.

Unsurprisingly, the curry restaurant and café owners in Brick Lane have adapted to survive the fall in demand for their services. While the cafés serving authentic Sylheti-style food to local Bangladeshi residents on housing estates on either side of Brick Lane survived the pandemic relatively well through the takeaway trade, by contrast, restaurants that depend on revenue from dine-in customers have struggled. During the last lockdown (that ended on 17 May 2021) all had closed. Recent fieldwork has revealed that the owners of those that have reopened have trimmed their costs by reducing staff numbers and are closing earlier in the evening than before the pandemic. In addition, several restaurant owners have taken the decision to not open at lunchtime. Of course, they still face ongoing costs, and the payment of rent looms large in the multiple pressures bearing down on them.

Yet, there are signs of life in the Lane. Young, middle-class consumers are returning in considerable numbers to an area of the capital that, in large part because of its poly-ethnic and multicultural characteristics, continues to retain a 'cool' image. It is striking, however, that not that many hipsters (or wannabes) desire an old-style, white tablecloth curry experience. They much prefer the highly affordable street food offerings at the Old Truman Brewery on Brick Lane or the Old Spitalfields Market, a stone's throw away. The two numerically significant groups that value the dine-in experience — groups of City workers and international and domestic tourists — are currently in short supply. Most restaurateurs recently interviewed think that the visitor economy will revive in 2022. Much more problematic for them and other consumer-facing businesses on the eastern City fringe is the rise in hybrid and flexible working patterns with some workers coming to the office while others remain at home (choosing to continue the pandemic-induced Work from Home arrangement). The signals from major City employers are mixed about the preferred balance between these two modes of employment. It will likely be some time before the new working pattern in the [Square Mile](#) becomes clear. Nevertheless, a drop in the number of City people dining in Brick Lane's curry houses looks certain.

But ethnographic observation in Brick Lane and adjacent streets like Whitechapel High Street and Bethnal Green Road reveals the food delivery sector in particular has benefited enormously throughout the pandemic. Deliveroo, which recently made a controversial debut on the London stock market, is undoubtedly the dominant player though operatives working for other companies like Just Eat and Uber Eats are also visible. In this part of the capital, the exclusively male workforce with branded rain-proof boxes containing just-cooked meals balanced on their backs uses bicycles for transportation. A good number of these delivery riders are young Bangladeshis, students or new migrants who, under pre-pandemic circumstances, might have found work in front-of-house roles in the Lane's curry restaurants. It is also of some significance that a branch of Foodstars, the so-called dark or ghost kitchen start-up acquired in 2019 by Uber co-founder Travis Kalanick, is located in a railway arch on Vallance Road, a street that runs parallel to Brick Lane. A steady stream of Deliveroo riders arrives and departs throughout the day serving breakfast, lunch and dinner to nearby households. Like the pattern of home or office working, the question of whether local food delivery in sites with low overheads has taken a significant share of the dine-in curry market and that of other ethnic-minority owned restaurants in Brick Lane or created a new market is yet to be determined.

Meanwhile, in the aftermath of the pandemic and Brexit, the [City of London](#) is determined to forge an alternative future for itself as a creative and digital industries hub to run alongside the traditional financial service sector. To that end, the City of London Corporation wants to [reposition the area as a 'sustainable' retail, hospitality, culture and tourism space](#), especially at weekends. Several streets are already undergoing pedestrianisation to encourage domestic and international visitors. The Corporation is also consulting about the part-pedestrianisation of an area around Bank underground station. If successful, that will put parts of the Square Mile in direct competition with Brick Lane and the adjacent City fringe area of Tower Hamlets.

Significant structural change in the way inner and outer city dwellers, and those living further afield who commute into London, are working, consuming and living is underway. Inevitably, that will have a profound effect on those who make their livelihoods in the curry restaurants of Brick Lane.

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