

FRIED CHICKEN

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Woodgrange Road in London's Newham is where cheap chickens go after they die. Just across the road from Forest Gate station, at number 37a, is the wipe-down palace that is Dixy Chicken, where they sell 600 pieces of deep-fried hen a day. Over at number 45 is Favourite Chicken and Ribs. There's KFC at 31, Chicken Inn at 74 and Royal Fried Chicken at 107. Nearby on adjoining streets there's Eurofried Chicken, Galaxy Chicken and the Ronseal of fast-food shops – it does what it says on the tin – Kebab Burger Chicken. Someone round here really, really likes fried chicken.

To find out who, you need only stand on the corner by the station from 3pm on a weekday. For that's when the nine schools clustered around Woodgrange Road – five primaries and four secondaries, 4,000 pupils in all – start chucking out. Waiting for them, bobbing in oil, are the deals: three spicy wings with regular fries for £1, two pieces of chicken and chips for £2; or the “student special”: one piece of

chicken, regular fries plus a can of Pepsi, also for £2. Soon the kids will emerge, shrapnel swapped for various things that have taken a short bath in deep fat.

There is nothing unusual about Woodgrange Road. It's the same story all over Britain's inner-city areas, and especially in London. There are now 8,000 fast-food outlets in the capital, one for every 1,000 Londoners, and their number is growing by around 10% every year. Cheap fried chicken shops are a significant part of that. The fried-chicken market alone is now worth between £15 and £20bn a year. Of 258 fast-food outlets in Newham – no secondary school is more than 500 metres away from one – more than 70 are fried-chicken shops. They have become the go-to option for children looking for lunch on the high street, or an after-school snack.

But they're more than just places in which to buy stuff. For school-age children the fried-chicken shops are now “third spaces” between the classroom and home. For certain urban tribes they're like train stations: a fixed point through which life crosses back and forth. In the way of cities not all of it is shiny and positive; they have been associated with gang crime and antisocial behaviour. Bad things sometimes happen in them, and around them, which has nothing to do with dismal food. At other times, however, they operate more as refuge than food dispensary.

Across two series of *The Fried Chicken Shop*, Channel 4's observational documentary series set in a south London branch of the small Roosters Spot chain, every aspect of life has been acted out, in all its stained and chipped glory. There's the lonely cross-dresser befriended by a gaggle of teenage girls,

the young couple celebrating the news that a baby's on the way, the middle-aged ladies in their woolly hats, discussing the value of their friendship. Sneering at them is easy; recognising just how stitched into the fabric of our lives the chicken shop has become is much harder.

I stand and watch the uniform-clad youth of Newham flock towards them like birds after torn and discarded bread. Today, the borough's chicken outlets have competition. Parked a few metres away from Dixy Chicken is the knowingly funky red-painted street food Box Chicken van. It's a new initiative from We Are What We Do, a not-for-profit company involved in tackling social and environmental issues, and backed with money from Create London, which produces and commissions arts projects in the area. For a month the van will be based here trying to wean the kids away from the fried stuff, with freshly made chicken stews.

Peering out from the serving hatch is cook Giles Smith, a veteran of the street-food scene and founder of Foodhawkers, the street-food traders' network. “We're trying something here that could be really big,” he says, over the huge paella-style pans that have been used to cook the stews, now in holding trays behind him. I try his Caribbean chicken, made with lots of fresh coriander and lime juice, peppers and jerk seasoning, all piled on to rice. It's bright and fresh, a big slap of flavour and heat. “You don't have to worry about spice round here,” Smith says. “They like it hot.” For adults a portion is £3.50, but for students it's £2.50. “It's a nice project. It really could be a big business.”

His dogged optimism will come in handy. I may like his food, but then I'm a 47-year-old man with big thighs and a growing sense of my own mortality. Right now, on day one, >

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most of the kids, deaf to hardened arteries and aortic aneurysms, are still heading straight for their daily dose of fat and carbs. This is not helped by the fact there is a sizeable Muslim community round here and Smith admits that, unlike the chicken shops, he has omitted to use halal chicken. It feels like a moment of good intentions, undone by lack of planning.

A group of sixth formers from nearby St Angela's Ursuline school turns up and makes approving noises. "In terms of keeping healthy it's really good," says one. "It's a lot better than what we normally get," says another. However, this lot is the head girl and deputy and a few of the prefects, as badged up as a line of army generals. They've been dispatched by the school to give a bit of a boost to a project which they have been actively supporting. The girls all quickly admit it's a bit far from their school for them to make it a regular thing. Still, at least there's 12-year-old Duval, who buys a pot, takes a forkful and declares it "delicious".

THE BOX CHICKEN project could do with a lot more Duvals, because there really is a serious problem which needs tackling. Fried chicken is making our kids fat. Childhood obesity levels have tripled in the past 15 years, with more than one in three aged between 11 and 15 now overweight or obese. And there's a clear correlation between poverty, fast-food restaurants and weight problems. The poorer an area the more fast-food outlets, and unsurprisingly so – that's where rents are lowest, enabling cash-poor businesses to cut their prices.

Newham, one of London's most deprived boroughs, has the fifth highest level of obesity among Year Six students in England at just over 25%, against the already startling national

average of 19%. What's more, a fast-food outlet within 160m of a school has been shown to be associated with an increase in obesity rates among 15- and 16-year-olds of more than 5%. And we know that obesity leads to major health problems in later life.

"As well as being really tasty and really convenient," says Nick Stanhope of We Are What We Do, "fried chicken is also really unhealthy. Your average chicken-shop meal of chips, chicken and a drink has about 70% of your daily calories, over half of your daily salt and half your daily fat." The Box Chicken food has a 10th of the saturated fat and less than a fifth of the salt. Plus, the raw ingredients are better. "Chicken-shop sourcing standards tend to be pretty low because they're having to buy incredibly low-cost goods due to selling things at incredibly low margins."

But then we know all this. These chickens lead short, bitter lives of cramped ammonia-drenched darkness. All of which has made fried chicken ripe for gentrification in recent years. Once burgers and hot dogs had been given the pimped ermine-collar treatment, it was only a matter of time before chicken went the same way.

"I do see our buttermilk-fried chicken as an attempt to rescue the dish," says Ross Gardner of street-food van Spit and Roast, which started using boned-out free-range chicken thighs, marinated in buttermilk, to make its £6 chicken in a bun two years ago. "I've succumbed to the dirty chicken shop on a drunken night out and it's not a good thing. We wanted to bring it out

of the doldrums." Serving it from their street-food van, with its vintage car vibe, also separates it from the Formica-clad, plastic-gilded village square of the fried-chicken shop.

Likewise, the buttermilk chicken burger, served at chef Jackson Boxer's Dalston pop-up Rita's Bar and Dining, or at Solita in Manchester, was as much a statement about the sort of people who coughed up £7.50 for it – £11.90 at Solita – as the admittedly fabulous food item itself. The Dalston hipsters who bought it at the pop-up were not going to be seen dead in the riot of blue and red plastic which was the fried chicken shop across the Stoke Newington Road. The arrival

in Brixton Market of Wishbone last year, which specifically sells itself as a quality fried-chicken shop, was lambasted by critics, including this one, for being consciously exclusive; the high counters and

bar stools made it all but impossible to eat in there with a buggy or if you had any mobility problems. Plus, the sauce-drenched chicken felt like a waste of free-range hen.

The school kids of Newham, meanwhile, know exactly which type of chicken shop they belong in. The problem is that challenging kids' eating behaviour is not simply a matter of telling them the food is bad both for them and the chickens. Martin Caraher, professor of food and health policy at City University, has recently carried out research into the impact of fast-food outlets on child health for the neighbouring borough of Haringey. He acknowledges the value of the Box Chicken project, but >

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An average chicken shop meal of chips, chicken and a drink contains about 70% of your daily calories



Chicken to go: staff hard at work in the Channel 4 series The Fried Chicken Shop

wonders whether it could really compete. "It's expensive," Caraher says. "We've seen all those chicken deals for 99p so why would they spend £2.50 on the alternative?" The fact is today's schoolchildren are economically savvy. "We've seen kids displaying good entrepreneurial skills. They club together to take advantage of two-for-one deals and the like." On top of that, he says, there's an awful lot of social pressure. Eating in the school canteen is simply not cool.

The team behind Box Chicken do acknowledge the problems. "You could close down chicken shops, but you're not going to take away the need," Stanhope says. The original plan had been to serve a healthier form of fried chicken, but they concluded they had to provide a distinct alternative; that they couldn't challenge the chicken shop model. In any case not everything about these sorts of businesses is negative. There's an assumption that they are big corporate ventures. It's not the case, four-fifths of them are owned by independents. "They have been thriving and growing during recession and they are paying rent," he says. In areas such as Newham, with high levels of deprivation, that is obviously a good thing. On the downside what they sell has the potential to seriously damage the children who are buying it.

A FEW DAYS after the project has kicked off, I return to Forest Gate to see how things are progressing. Giles admits he's had "busier days". Still, he's managed to get hold of halal chicken and that's given trade a bump. On day one I had pointed out the cheap chicken-shop meal deals. "That's really not something we can compete with," he said. Since then, however, the team has introduced a smaller £1.50 snack box, and that, too, is making a difference.

"It's a slow, gradual process," Smith says.

Shortly after 3pm a large group of Year 10 girls - 14- and 15-year-olds - arrive in the distinctive brown jackets with yellow piping of St Angela's. It's a cross section of the community: there are girls from Nigerian, Jamaican and Ghanaian families. All of them eat what the chicken shops sell. "It's available and it's cheap and it's quick," says one. They all nod. "We have to eat it," says another, "because there's nothing else." But now they're all buying some of the Box Chicken stew. They make all the right noises, say it's delicious and fresh and lovely, claim they're going to tell everyone

at school just how great it is. It looks like a minor victory for the Box Chicken project. However, it then transpires that one of the teachers gave them the money, from her own pocket. Still, at least Duval comes by again - he still thinks the Caribbean chicken is delicious.

On their best day in week two they had sold 29 portions to students, split between full-size and snack boxes. The day before that they had sold just eight. "Giles is doing a brilliant job," says Hadrian Garrard, director of Create London, which funded the project. "He's not just selling food. He's talking to the kids, too. The question is, how do you make something like this sustainable without public funding?" He muses that they may not have found the right approach. One thought is to put the street food vans right outside the school gates. School pupils are notoriously driven by convenience. But he also thinks the third space of the

chicken shop itself might be the thing. "I'm actually wondering whether what we really need is some form of shop unit that mimics the ones they're already going to. There's all that interest in upmarket fried-chicken places at the moment. Perhaps we could have one that runs for a profit at night, with a licence so it can sell beer. But at lunchtime it's selling healthier food to school kids at cost."

There is no doubting the good intentions of the Box Chicken project. But the chicken-shop phenomenon is also about the glorious obstinacy of teenagers expressing their freedom through what little economic power they

have. Choosing to spend 99p on a bunch of stuff many people would rather they didn't eat is a quiet form of rebellion. And, of course, it's about the grind of city life on the margins.

There are very few levers those wanting to

make a difference have to pull on. Some local government money is being spent on healthy-eating education programmes but those tend to be exercises in preaching to the converted. Using planning laws to limit the number of fast-food restaurants around schools has been discussed but that will always be balanced against the perceived imperative of supporting small businesses. Compared to that the Box Chicken project starts to look like the only practical effort to do something. It needs to be given time to find its way. Meanwhile, on Britain's high streets, the salty, breaded chicken portions keep hitting the deep-fat fryer. And Britain's schoolchildren keep buying them. ■

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'It's better than what we normally get': girls from St Angela's Ursuline School sample Box Chicken's healthier options