

Eating Out in Britain During WWII

British people did not use their personal ration books when they went out to eat in cafes, restaurants or hotels during World War II; meals eaten out were exempt from the personal rationing system. This was done to encourage public catering, as it was more efficient in terms of energy and food usage.

However, the initial exemption led to public resentment because wealthier people could supplement their rations by dining out frequently. As a result, the Ministry of Food introduced several restrictions on restaurants in May 1942 to ensure fairness:

- **Meal Limits:** Meals were limited to a maximum of three courses.
- **Ingredient Restrictions:** Only one component dish could contain fish, game, or poultry (but not more than one of these).
- **Price Controls:** A maximum price of five shillings was set for a meal, although some luxury hotels found ways to add extra charges for entertainment or service.
- **Hours of Operation:** No meals could generally be served between 11:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. without a special licence.



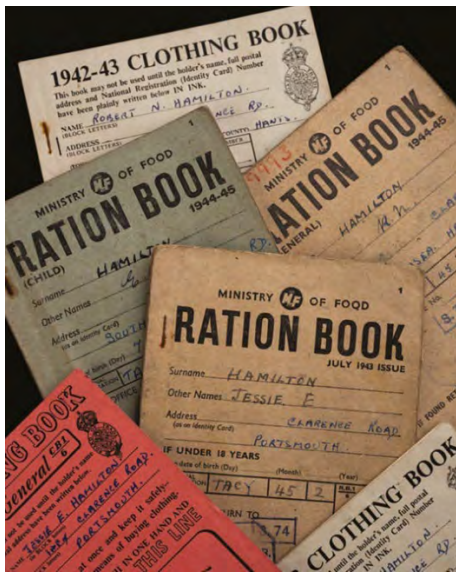
In addition to private restaurants, the government established a network of communal feeding centres (*left*), (renamed **British Restaurants** by Winston Churchill in 1942). These offered simple, nutritious, three-course meals for a very low, fixed price (around 9d) without requiring ration coupons. They were designed to help

those who had been bombed out of their homes, industrial workers, and anyone who needed a hot, affordable meal to supplement their at-home rations.

Why Rationing?

Diverting the country's manpower and production into the war effort and the U-boat menace sinking merchant ships meant that consumer goods of all kinds became scarce and shortages were inevitable. To ensure an equitable distribution of basic essentials, rationing was imposed through a 'points' system and prices were controlled. Ration books and clothing coupons were issued to all, with adjustments to meet special needs, like those carrying out heavy manual work, pregnant women, young children and vegetarians. People registered with their local grocer, baker, butcher etc. and entered their supplier's details in their books. By and large the public supported rationing as ensuring fair shares for all, and though a black market developed it never seriously threatened the system. It is generally accepted

that food rationing improved the nation's health through the imposition of a balanced diet with essential vitamins.



Meat, butter and sugar were rationed from early 1940, other foodstuffs, including tea, were added later, and entitlement varied at different times during the war. Bread, potatoes, coffee, vegetables, fruit and fish were never rationed, though choice and availability of the last three were often limited. *“The main grouse of people at the moment is that they are not able to buy all they want at the shops, especially in the food line. It isn't the rationing they complain of, but their inability to buy unrationed goods”*, wrote a Harrow cinema manager to the Ministry of Information in March 1941.

The Ministry of Agriculture's 'Dig for Victory' slogan encouraged people to grow fruit and vegetables on any available land - gardens, parks, allotments. The London Passenger Transport Board supplied its staff canteens with vegetables grown alongside railway tracks. Some people kept pigs, rabbits and chickens in suburban gardens to supplement their diet, feeding them on household scraps.



Meals eaten away from home, whether in expensive West End restaurants like The Ritz (left), or industrial canteens, were 'off ration' and a popular alternative, particularly with Londoners, who could afford them. The conspicuous ability of the rich to enjoy almost pre-war levels of gastronomy at top hotels led to such resentment from Londoners at large that the government prevented restaurants charging more than

5/- a meal from 1942. This curbed the most ostentatious examples, though it did not completely solve the problem. Other restaurants fell more within the average Londoner's experience, especially the country-wide chain of Lyons' tea shops and Corner Houses.

'British Restaurants' supplied another almost universal experience of eating away from home. Here a three-course meal cost only 9d. Standards varied, but the best were greatly appreciated and had a large regular clientele. British Restaurants were run by local authorities, who set them up in a variety of different premises such as schools and church halls. They evolved from the LCC's Londoners' Meals

Service which originated in September 1940 as a temporary, emergency system for feeding those who had been bombed out. By mid-1941 the LCC was operating two hundred of these restaurants.

How Restaurants and Hotels in Britain Got Food Supplies in WWII

1. Ministry of Food Controls

All food distribution was centrally managed by the **Ministry of Food**. Restaurants and hotels could only buy ingredients through **licensed wholesalers** who received government-allocated supplies.

These wholesalers (e.g., for meat, dairy, vegetables, and dry goods) were given quotas based on:

- Restaurant/hotel size
- Number of meals served
- Whether they served essential workers or the public
- Staff needs (hotels also fed resident staff)

2. Rationing Rules for Catering Establishments

Unlike private families, restaurants and hotels were **not individually rationed**, but they faced strict limits. They had rules like:

- **No meal could contain more than 3 courses**
- **Meat content per meal was limited** (e.g., 3 oz cooked meat per serving at one stage)
- **Sugar and fats** were restricted by weekly quotas
- **Bread** wasn't rationed until 1946, but waste was illegal

These limits controlled *how much* they could buy.

3. Bulk Purchase from Government Suppliers

Large hotels—like those in London—often received their supplies from:

- **National Wholesale Food Distributors**
- **Government-controlled meat depots**
- **Butter and margarine wholesalers**
- **Local wartime food officers** who issued quotas

Hotels serving military personnel sometimes had additional allocations.

4. Local Markets (Highly Regulated)

Some items, especially **fresh produce**, could still come from:

- Local municipal markets
- Farmers supplying through wholesalers
- Government-directed “emergency” vegetable depots

However, farmers were heavily regulated—private deals or direct farm purchases outside the rationing system were illegal.

5. “British Restaurants” (Government-run Canteens)

These weren’t private restaurants—they were **public, municipal dining halls** created to ensure affordable meals. They got their supplies directly from:

- **Ministry of Food bulk allocations**
- **Local authority distribution centres**

Their food came from the government, not commercial suppliers.

6. Hotels Housing Evacuees, Troops, or Government Workers

These establishments often:

- Received **extra rations**
- Had direct supply allocations from the Ministry
- Sometimes had military or civil-service catering support

Private hotels used their normal quota plus supplement for their assigned population.

7. Black Market (Unofficial but Widespread)

Some restaurants quietly supplemented supplies through illegal channels (*right*):

- Unrationed meat
- Extra butter, eggs, and sugar
- Alcohol (less restricted)

High-end restaurants sometimes had wealthy clients who could bring their own ration coupons, allowing the restaurant to “legalise” more supplies.

8. Victory Gardens and Private Produce

Hotels with gardens sometimes grew:

- Vegetables (potatoes, carrots, cabbage)
- Herbs
- Soft fruit

This didn’t replace rationed goods but helped stretch supplies.



Summary

British restaurants and hotels got food supplies during WWII through:

1. **Government-controlled wholesalers and quotas**
2. **Strict meal-size restrictions** instead of household ration books
3. **Supplementary allocations** for hotels serving troops or evacuees
4. **Government-run public restaurants** with separate supply streams

5. **Local regulated markets**
6. **Occasional black-market purchases**
7. **Home-grown produce** where possible

What British Restaurant & Hotel Menus Looked Like (WWII)

Restaurants could not serve extravagant meals, but they tried to be creative with substitutes. Key characteristics:

Common Wartime Menu Themes

- Very **little meat**, usually minced, stewed, or padded with oats/breadcrumbs
- Many **root vegetables**: carrots, parsnips, turnips, potatoes
- **Dried eggs** instead of shell eggs
- No elaborate pastries (sugar & fats too limited)
- Frequent use of **offal**: liver, kidneys, tripe
- Many dishes were designed to **fill you up cheaply**, like pies, stews, suet puddings, and dumplings



Mobile Kitchen WWII

Typical 1943 Restaurant Lunch Menu

- **Meat & Potato Pie** with gravy
- **Carrot and Parsnip Mash**
- **Woolton Pie** (vegetarian, Ministry of Food invention)
- **Stewed Plums** with custard (made from powdered milk and eggs)
- **Tea or Barley Coffee Substitute**

Typical Hotel Dinner Menu (Mid-range hotel, 1942)

- **Clear vegetable broth**
- **Braised Liver with Onions**
- **Potato Puff** (mashed potatoes baked with dried egg)
- **Apple Charlotte** (often with very little sugar)
- **Tea or chicory coffee**

Hotels tried to maintain elegance, but the ingredients were limited.

How Restaurants Cheated Rationing Rules (Real Practices)



Waiters at the Savoy in WWII

Although illegal, many restaurants quietly bent the rules.

Common Cheats

A. Coupon swapping / “covering” with customer coupons

Wealthy customers would pay for a meal *plus* hand over ration coupons. Restaurants could then use those coupons to obtain extra supplies legally.

B. “Off-the-ration” meat

The black market sold:

- rabbit (legal but often passed off as chicken)
- chicken and turkey
- beef and lamb from illicit slaughter

C. Extending ingredients

- Mixing **soya flour**, oats, or breadcrumbs into meat
- Watering down soups
- Reusing fat multiple times
- Making “cream” from margarine + milk powder

D. Back-door buying from farmers

Illegal but widespread in rural areas. Farmers would sell:

- butter
- eggs
- fresh pork
- cream

E. “Private rooms” loophole

Some restaurants pretended to be *private clubs*, allowing them to avoid some public catering restrictions. The Ministry of Food did routine inspections, but restaurateurs were skilled at hiding forbidden items.

How Luxury Hotels (Savoy, Ritz, Claridge’s) Stayed Open and Glamorous

These establishments remained surprisingly luxurious thanks to a few key advantages.

A. Wealthy foreign guests

High-end hotels hosted:

- diplomats
- foreign businessmen
- journalists
- neutral-country envoys (e.g., from Sweden, Portugal, Switzerland)
- international Red Cross staff



The Savoy in WWII

Foreign guests were allowed to import or purchase food with foreign currency, giving hotels unusual access to high-quality supplies.

B. “Supplementary allocations”

The Ministry of Food granted extra rations to hotels serving:

- military officers
- government ministries
- foreign governments

This gave them more meat, butter, and sugar than ordinary restaurants.

C. Owners with international connections

The Savoy Group had long-standing relationships with:

- fish suppliers
- high-end butchers
- wine merchants

These connections helped them secure the best of whatever was available.

D. Creative menus

Luxury hotels focused on:

- fish (less rationed)
- shellfish (not rationed)
- game (often off-ration)
- elaborate vegetable dishes
- French-style sauces thickened with roux substitutes

E. Rumoured black market purchases



British Restaurant in Portsmouth

Historians believe some luxury hotels quietly supplemented their supplies illegally, though this was never openly acknowledged.

What British Restaurants (Government Canteens) Served

These were **not private restaurants** — they were **municipal, nonprofit dining halls** created so everyone could get an affordable meal.

Typical Prices

- **3-course meal: about 9 pence**
- Tea: 1 penny
- Slice of bread: ½ penny

Typical British Restaurant Menu

- **Lentil & Vegetable Soup**
- **Steamed Steak Pudding** (tiny amount of meat, mostly suet dough)
- **Vegetable Pie**
- **Haddock and Potatoes**
- **Jam Sponge**
- **Custard (powdered)**

These places were hugely popular — millions ate there weekly.

Ministry of Food Inspectors — What They Did

The Ministry of Food had a surprisingly large inspection force. Their jobs included:

A. Checking ration compliance

Inspectors verified that restaurants:

- did not exceed the maximum meat allowed per meal
- did not use extra sugar or butter
- kept proper records of purchases from wholesalers

They sometimes weighed portions directly in the kitchen.

B. Preventing black-market food

Inspectors looked for:

- meat without proper slaughterhouse stamps
- eggs without producer codes
- unusually large stocks of butter, bacon, or sugar
- goods arriving at odd hours via back entrances
- missing paperwork for potatoes, fish, or vegetables

They could confiscate illegal food and shut down the establishment.

C. Monitoring British Restaurants (municipal canteens)

Ensuring they:

- served approved menus
- kept prices low
- provided adequate nutrition

D. Visiting farms

They checked that farmers didn't slaughter animals privately or sell butter/cream off-book.



British Restaurant

E. Public education

Inspectors (and Ministry "Food

Advisers") ran cooking demonstrations, posters, and radio spots to teach people:

- how to make mock cream
- how to stretch meat
- vegetable recipes
- ways to use powdered milk and eggs

F. Enforcement powers

They could:

- issue fines
- prosecute black-market dealers
- revoke a restaurant's license

However, enforcement varied by region; some areas were stricter than others.

Ration Quantities and How They Shaped Cooking

Here are the key 1942–44 average weekly rations *per adult*, and what they meant for restaurants and hotels.

A. Meat (approx. 1s 2d worth — often 1 small chop or a few ounces)

This forced restaurants to use:

- minced meat
- stews
- pies padded with oats
- offal (much more available)

B. Butter (2 oz), Margarine (4 oz), Cooking Fat (2 oz)

- Creamy sauces disappeared.
- Pastry became coarse and brittle.
- Hotels used more gravy-based sauces.

Fried foods were rare except in places with special allocations (like fish and chip shops).

C. Sugar (8 oz)

- Desserts became simpler, often relying on fruit or syrups.
- Cakes were dense and small.
- Restaurants used custard powder heavily (required no eggs).

D. Eggs (1 fresh egg per week + dried egg occasionally)

- Menus switched to puddings, suet crusts, and “mock” baked goods.
- Hotels saved fresh eggs for VIP guests.

E. Milk (3 pints + powdered milk)

- Drinks often included milk substitutes.
- Cream sauces were nearly impossible without military/diplomatic supplies.

F. Cheese (2 oz weekly)

- Cheese rarely appeared in restaurants except in special pies.

G. Bread (not rationed until 1946)

- Bread became the universal filler.
- Restaurants served many dishes with toast, croutons, or thick slices.

H. Vegetables (unrationed but seasonal)

- Carrots, potatoes, cabbage, swedes, and onions were staples.
- Carrots sweetened cakes and desserts due to sugar shortages.
- The Ministry constantly promoted vegetable-heavy dishes like **Woolton Pie**.

I. Fish (not rationed but scarce)

- Restaurants used fish whenever they could get it.
- Hotels often had better access, especially to imported frozen fish.