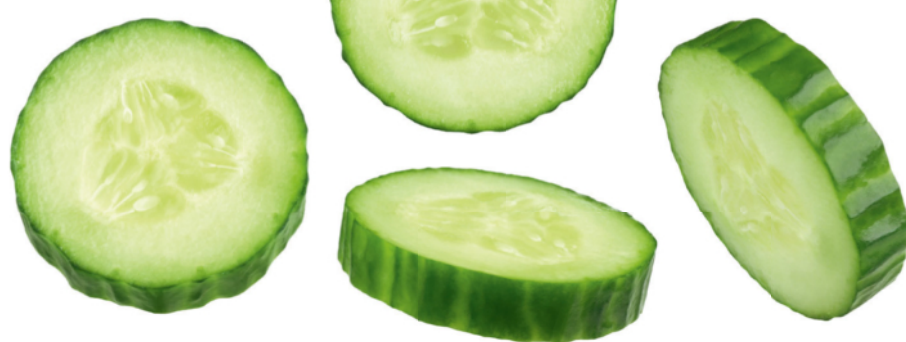




Cool as a cucumber sandwich

The popular fixture of the tea table was delighting diners long before Enid Blyton's young adventurers tucked into them, reveals Deborah Nicholls-Lee

CUCUMBER dipped in vinegar! begins Anne excitedly in Enid Blyton's *Five Go Off to Camp*, reeling off with enthusiasm the sandwiches prepared for them for a moorland hike to their pitching spot. 'Oooh, Mr Luffy, your sandwiches are much nicer than ours!'

It's not hard to imagine that fresh, tangy fillings such as cucumber would have delighted post-war picnickers such as the Famous Five. In both fiction and reality, our affection for the cucumber sandwich has been enduring. Piled on patterned plates at cricket matches and summer regattas, it's a snack that feels quintessentially English, yet its origins lie in India. Wilting under the searing heat, officials of the British Raj found relief in a refreshing local crop: the cucumber. They gave this fruit, made up of about 95% water, an English twist by sandwiching it between delicate slices of soft white bread—and then transporting the tradition back home.

The cucumber's 4,000-year-old ancestor was a bitter-tasting gourd with a bulbous form and prickly skin, but it was gradually sweetened by selective breeding. Centuries before British colonials popularised the cucumber sandwich, Europe's rulers were already developing a taste for the fresh green crunch. In the 1st century AD, on the island of Capri off Italy, the Emperor Tiberius was widely reported to have commissioned the first *specularium* (proto greenhouse) to ensure a year-round supply of cucumbers to satisfy his daily cravings. By the early medieval period, Frankish king Charlemagne had issued an edict, decreeing that his cherished cucumbers be grown on all his estates.

In Britain, cucumbers were also once the preserve of the elite, as much fuel and space was needed to run the hothouses in which they were cultivated. As coal became cheap and plentiful in the mid 19th century, the practice proliferated and these prestigious foreign fruits, forced into straight forms by hand-blown glass tubes, became a point of pride. As etiquette expert William Hanson recently shared with his followers as he enjoyed afternoon tea at The Goring: 'In Victorian-era Britain, cucumber was the caviar of its day.'

'A plate of delicate cucumber sandwiches soon came to be seen as a prominent signifier of social status, highly recommended by the many authors of afternoon-tea etiquette books that appeared throughout the Victorian era,' Gillian Perry, author of *Please Pass the Scones: A Social History of English Afternoon Tea*, says. 'Unlike the starchy English vegetables that graced dinner plates, cucumbers held a more exotic

air. The delicacy [of the sandwiches] added to the understanding that afternoon tea was a treat confined to the upper middle and aristocratic classes.' In the evening, they would sit down to a substantial evening meal, she explains. 'As such, the afternoon tea-table items were not required to fully sustain.'

Mrs Beeton's *Book of Household Management*, first published in 1861, concurs that sandwiches confectioned for afternoon tea are 'dainty trifles, pleasing to the eye and palate, but too flimsy to allay hunger where it exists'. The leisured classes did not need the hearty meal served to manual workers and these light, spongy snacks boasted the idleness of those who enjoyed them.

'These light, spongy snacks boasted the idleness of those who enjoyed them'



In P. G. Wodehouse's 1932 short story *Open House*, such idleness sees the cucumber sandwich become a missile. The host, Eustace Milliner, is joined for afternoon tea by his formidable aunt, Lady Alcester, a woman who is described as 'passionately addicted to cucumber sandwiches' and prone to 'fling herself on them like a starving wolf'. Yet when her cat, Francis, begins to stalk William, the canary Milliner is minding, the cucumber sandwiches are hastily hurled at the would-be killer. Although the canary survives, the



featherlight refreshment proves an inadequate projectile. 'The very nature of a cucumber sandwich makes it poor throwing,' we're told. 'He could have obtained direct hits on Francis all day without slowing him up.'

Another cucumber-mad aunt, Lady Bracknell, appears in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where cucumber sandwiches are again code for the trivial preoccupations of the satirised upper classes. Her nephew and host, Algernon Moncrieff, has a corresponding penchant for the 'reckless

extravagance' of this sandwich and, before Lady Bracknell can lay a gloved finger on the delicacy, he has absentmindedly swallowed the lot. When she enquires about the promised sandwiches, Lane, the butler, supplies a swift lie. 'There were no cucumbers in the market this morning,' he fibs. 'Not even for ready money.'

Not everyone, however, took to cucumbers so enthusiastically. They were once known as 'cowcumbers', as it was thought only cattle could digest them. This name was later

Worth the readies: ensure you get to the market early for the freshest cucumbers

deemed unseemly by Victorians such as Charles Dickens, who used it to send up the gin-soaked, snuff-loving nurse Mrs Sairey Gamp in *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*. 'In case there should be such a thing as a cowcumber in the 'ouse, will you be so kind as bring it, for I'm rather partial to 'em,' announces this corpulent woman with 'a husky voice' and 'very little neck'. ➔

Fill your cup

The cucumber sandwich is not the only element of a traditional afternoon tea with an Indian heritage: how we drink our tea is also a function of our colonial history. Where once we imported the leaves from China, where green tea and lighter black teas dominated, the East India Company saw an opportunity to circumvent this monopoly by establishing huge plantations in India, maintained by forced labour. The black tea harvested during this dark chapter was stronger and more tannic than British Imperialists were accustomed to, so they added milk and sugar to make it more palatable.

According to Dr Johnson's famous epithet, the 'physicians in England' feel that 'a cucumber should be well sliced, and dressed with pepper and vinegar, and then thrown out, as good for nothing'. The writer Sir Compton MacKenzie was equally disparaging about the conventions of the British afternoon tea. 'You are offered a piece of bread and butter that feels like a damp handkerchief—and sometimes, when cucumber is added to it, like a wet one,' he complained.

‘The afternoon tea’s “delicate little sandwiches” are “a culinary art form”’

There's no risk of a soggy sandwich at our most esteemed establishments. London's Claridge's serves an estimated 22,000 afternoon teas each year, slicing some 58,000 loaves into neat, crustless fingers. Cucumber-sandwich recipes vary, from a version with cream cheese, dill and horseradish root to a summery take with lemon crème fraîche. The perfect sandwich, it suggests on its menu, is 'a delicately balanced two-thirds bread and one-third filling'. Meanwhile, in Marylebone, the Langham's indulgent variations have included cucumber enveloped in clotted cream or pickled in Champagne and elderflower.

The sandwiches enjoyed by Elizabeth II also had a special twist. 'The best cucumber



Never flashy, always essential: the cucumber sandwich is the foundation of teatime

sandwich I've had was at a Buckingham Palace garden party,' recalls COUNTRY LIFE Editor-in-Chief Mark Hedges, who has been a guest on several occasions. 'The added chopped mint makes all the difference.'

As Clarissa Dickson Wright noted in her 2011 book *A History of English Food*, afternoon tea's 'delicate little sandwiches' are 'a culinary art form in themselves'. It was a lady's maid who taught her how to cut slender slices of bread by heating a sharpened steel knife in a jug of boiling water and then wiping it dry. Sir Winston Churchill, who insisted 'the bread must be wafer-thin, nothing more than a vehicle to convey the filling to the stomach', would have approved.

The cucumber, too, should be sliced 'very finely,' Dickson Wright recommended. 'Leave it to stand with some salt on it, then rinse

the salt off and add a little oil and pepper.' Mrs Beeton added 'vinegar or lemon juice' for acidity; and, in her 1894 tome *Sandwiches*, the pioneering American domestic scientist Sarah Tyson Rorer took the art form to extremes, requiring us to soak the sliced cucumber in iced water for one to two hours to make them 'crisp and brittle'.

Let no one say that the cucumber sandwich is simple or ordinary. Food writers Hilda Lyle and Olga Hartley were surely on the right path when they proposed in *The Gentle Art of Cookery* of 1925 that such delicious morsels warrant a degree of formality. 'The proper accompaniment of a sandwich is not the schoolboy's ginger beer or railway station coffee,' they assert, 'but a glass of Champagne.' 🇬🇧

