

The greasy spoon chronicles: a day in the life of the Hope Workers Cafe

This traditional British caff is the beating heart of its north London community

The first customer of the day pushes through the door a little after 7.30am. His name is Matthew. He is thin and pale and blond, and trembling a little from the cold. Sue Anayiotou, who has owned and run this cafe with her husband Chris these past 31 years, turns at the sound of the door, checks him out and turns back to me. "Homeless. I'll just be a minute."

Matthew asks for a fried egg sandwich. She offers him a cup of tea to go with it. He nods, gratefully. No money changes hands, because no money is required. In the window is a red and white sign, designed in the early months of the pandemic by a regular customer, which reads: "Pay it forward, donate a meal for someone who needs it". Beneath that it says: "Free Hot Meals for anyone who cannot afford one. Just come in and ask." Which is what Matthew has done. "Sometimes there will be one of them," says Sue. "Sometimes six." The customer who designed the sign also put the first £200 into the pot and it's grown from there. It's an appropriately dignified start to a working day at a cafe called the Hope.



An early-morning customer arrives. Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer

The Hope Workers Cafe on London's Holloway Road first opened in 1937 and is what some people might call a greasy spoon. Those people include its owners. "Well, of course it's a greasy spoon," says Chris, as he sears rashers on the hot plate for the day's first bacon sandwich. "It's not a restaurant, is it?" Chris is 64. He's broad and stocky and salt-and-pepper stubbled, and given to blunt, mildly world-weary statements. I watch him cut fat off the bacon with the sharp edge of his scraper, his key tool for the lengthy parade of breakfasts that will fly out of here today. He can flip the eggs with it, and shimmy the sausages, and attend to the rinds. This kitchen is starting to smell deeply of crisping pig and newly fried chips. It smells of all the good, domestic things.

In London it's hard to find somewhere that sticks to its values. A lot of cafes here are a parody. This is just itself.

Sam and Corbin, regular customers

Chris's dad, who came to Britain from a village near Larnaca in Cyprus after the war, ran another cafe like this in Waterloo called the Victory. "I learned how to cook from watching him," Chris

says. Eventually he and Sue, who came to Britain in 1975, took it over but the one-bedroom flat up above was not big enough for their growing family. They heard that the building in Islington that houses the Hope was up for sale, bought it and took on the cafe, which came with a cook called George. “He’d been here for about 40 years,” Chris says. “He was in the kitchen and I was out front. He had teeth when he started and none when he finished.” Eventually George retired and Chris moved into the kitchen.

The Hope might, at first glance, look like a museum piece: there’s the creamware-coloured frontage and the old-school carnival font for the signage, the half wood panelling and the six-seater wooden tables with their wrought iron legs, affixed to those walls from each side. There’s no Formica here. You would need to do precious little to shoot a 1940s period drama at the Hope. But it’s not a museum piece. It’s a working cafe, prized by locals not just for its bargain breakfasts, or the Greek dishes drawing on Sue and Chris’s Cypriot heritage, but for being a community hub, a third space outside the home. “I first came here when my kids were babies,” one of them will later tell me. “Now my children are in their 20s and they come here too.”

But it’s also an endangered species. Thousands of these caffs [have closed in recent years](#). Many were opened and run by first-generation immigrants like Chris’s dad, but the next generation didn’t always want to take them over, given the hours and the precarious economic reward. [The Breakfast Club](#), the now 18-strong chain of hip, knowingly retro cafes may be able to charge £12 for the Greasy Spoon, its take on the full English, hot drink extra. Here at the Hope, the famed No 5 – it’s not a real greasy spoon unless the breakfasts are numbered – costs just £6.40 for egg, bacon, sausage, chips, a fried slice, beans or tomato and a cup of tea or coffee.



Sue chats with some regulars as she takes their orders. Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer

Then there’s the literal and figurative appetite for this sort of high-calorie food. It’s engineered for a kind of manual labour that few are paid to do these days. When Chris first arrived, George used to fill the ovens with hunks of pork belly first thing to serve with cabbage to the Irish builders at lunchtime. “We don’t do that any more because the builders don’t come.” In a frothy food culture, where excitement builds over each new wave of innovation, over the arrival of live fire cooking, say, or fermentation cults, it’s easy to overlook the brilliant thing right in front of us. But one day it could be gone. And so, one chilly morning, I arrive at the Hope just before 7am

in time to watch Sue and Chris, who drive in from Enfield, raise the metal shutters on another day of cooked breakfasts, Greek classics and tea. Lots and lots of tea.

The main dining room is a long space, hung with sweet watercolours depicting Holloway Road through the ages. On the wall by the counter, now fronted by Covid-safe screens, are the blackboard menus. They used to have printed menus but that made putting prices up tricky. "And sometimes we have to," says Chris. "Last year 20 litres of vegetable oil was £19. Now it's £40."



Double burger, chips and beans. Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer

The menus are dizzying. "Yeah, it's a long menu and I've got a long brain," says Chris. There are the six numbered breakfast options, including the veggie No 3 (swap out the eggs for bubble and squeak, to make it vegan). Down the middle of the blackboard, it says, "No alterations please!" though there are so many choices on the main blackboard that it's not a problem: bacon and eggs for £3.60, two poached eggs on toast for £2.90, an extra fried slice for 50p.

Then there are the lunches, starting with the most expensive dish here, the mixed grill at a heady £10.90. Or there's the lamb chops, the lasagne or the shepherd's pie, the omelettes, jacket potatoes, sandwiches many and various and, of course, the Greek dishes that Sue was taught by

her aunt: the moussaka and the fasolaki and the stuffed courgettes, and so much more. "I used to cook those at home and bring them in," Sue says. "Now I do them here." I try the moussaka for my lunch, a soothing stratum of long cooked aubergine, minced lamb and bechamel, and a hefty follow-up to the cooked breakfast I'd had a few hours before. The No 5, since you asked. It would have been rude not to.

When they started in the early 1990s there wasn't much call for meat-free dishes. Then, says Sue, the requests for vegan food started. "I said to my son, who's a trained chef, what can I do? He told me all the Greek things could easily be vegan." So now there's a list of those. She also has boxes of herbal teas. That's relatively new too. One thing stays the same. It's still cash only. "Some bloke said he was going to the cash machine to get money," says Chris. "Never came back. Doesn't matter. Sue never forgets a face. If he comes in again, she'll charge him double."

To one side there's a smaller back dining room. It will remain empty today but every year the environmental health team from nearby Islington council HQ start their Christmas festivities with lunch there. "We get on well with environmental health," says Chris. They would have no complaints about the long galley-style kitchen this morning. It's spotless. Every day at the Hope ends with the clean down, so every day at the Hope starts like this. There's even a frying pan waiting on the gas hob, prefilled with a few centimetres of oil for the fried eggs, which are less fried than poached. Only the ones for sandwiches go on the flat top, the yolks broken with a flick of the just emptied shell, so they don't dribble too much.



Chris and Sue Anayiotou, owners of the Hope, take a well-earned break. Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer

Next to that is the bain-marie with cylindrical slots for the pots of peas, carrots, gravy and baked beans. Then come the two flat tops and, next to that, the deep-fat fryers. Out front, Sue butters bread for sandwiches and puts together the salads for lunch dishes. She calls the order and shoves the plate on to the counter just inside the kitchen for Chris to finish. "We don't write anything down," Chris says. "Just keep it all in our heads. She'll shout a number for a breakfast and that's all I need." Sometimes she doesn't even need to shout. "I see a regular come in and I know what they're having." Is it satisfying work? "It's nice to see the plates come back empty," he says. In the afternoon their grandson comes in to lend a hand, but most of the time it really is just the two of them, parrying an endless call and response of orders, in a mixture of English and Greek.

In the first few hours of the day, the orders are predictable, and Chris is ready for them. Behind him are plastic boxes, filled with pre-sliced mushrooms, mash ready-mixed with cabbage for bubble and squeak and sausages that have been half pre-cooked and chilled, plus the hand-cut chips. "We do use frozen chips," he says. "Bags of them. That's what goes on the breakfasts. But I also do the hand-cut."

Out front Sam is having breakfast with his mate, Corbin. They're lads in their 20s from northern towns, one a designer, one an artist. They meet here every couple of weeks. "It's honest," says Sam, when asked why he comes. "In London it's hard to find somewhere that sticks to its values." Corbin agrees. "Sue always looks after us really sweetly. It's kind of like being back home. A lot of London cafes feel like a parody of a cafe. This is just itself." They always have the same thing. "Vegetarian set number 3 for me," says Sam. "No alterations."



Sue serves regulars Sam and Corbin. Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer

Ian is in the meat trade and comes three or four times a week, has done for three years now. Poached eggs, bacon and toast if it's breakfast; liver and bacon if its lunch. "It's great to sit and observe," he says. "You get so many different sorts of people." He's not wrong. There's Armajit, a solicitor fresh from a case in the nearby magistrates court, here for the first time because he was taken by the cafe's name. He's a Jain and doesn't eat meat. "If that name means anything they'll be able to accommodate me." Indeed they will.

There's Hank, a retired social worker, who has come here twice a week for six years and Mercé, originally from Catalonia, who says she recognises in this very British caff so much of the venerable cafes of Spain. It's the kind of place where many of the customers clean up their own used mugs and plates, depositing them in the plastic box at the back to save Sue the trouble. In

the depths of the pandemic, when the business was at risk, those same regulars made donations and ordered takeaways to help them get by.



The Arsenal ground is only a short walk away and the Hope gets through 300 eggs on a match day. Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer

As breakfast edges into lunch Tony arrives. He used to be a postman. “A very bad one. I was a one-man union.” He’s been coming for 20 years, often in a foursome with his wife, Kathy, and another couple. But Kathy died last year and now he comes on his own, for the stuffed courgettes or, as today, the chilli with rice, but also for the memories of their life together. “It was Kathy’s favourite place to eat,” Tony says, quietly. “And they’re really nice people, Sue and Chris.” Sue returns the compliment. “I love my customers,” she says. “They’re like my family.” She has a small framed photograph of Kathy, perched on a shelf back behind the counter. Tony’s loss was theirs too.

Not that they can always know every customer. “You should be here on match day,” Chris says. “It’s mad then.” The Arsenal ground is only a short walk away and the Hope is where many people start. So I pop back one Saturday, when Arsenal are playing Brighton. From noon onwards the queue is stacking up towards the door and out on to the street like a losing game of Tetris, and both dining rooms are full. Chris is no longer cooking to order. He just keeps a constant

stream of breakfast ingredients going with the help of his son, also called Chris. And now he's writing things down. "I have to," he says. "No other way." He lists what they get through on a match day: 300 eggs and 10kg of bacon, five 2.6kg catering tins of baked beans and 40kg of chips. There's a pot washer in today, plus another pair of hands out front.

This job does your hands and knees in. So, we're up for sale. What would I do if I retired? I don't have hobbies.

Chris Anayiotou, chef-owner of the Hope cafe

Back at the Hope on that normal week day, it's quieter now, as the lunch trade slips down a gear. Business has suffered since the pandemic. "Before Covid it was always busy, all the time," says Sue. "Now, you just don't know." She also admits that, at 65, she has had enough. "She wants to stop," Chris says. "This job does your hands in and your knees. So, we're up for sale. But what would I do if I retired? I don't have hobbies." Not keen on golf then? He laughs. "I'm Greek. We gamble." Plus, there's the knotty business of finding a buyer for the Hope. What will it become then?

Closing time is 5pm but from around 3.30pm he is cleaning down. (On a normal day they'd also be prepping food but they did double yesterday, because they knew I was coming.) The floor is cleaned, the flat top scoured, the stove polished. Tucked away in a corner is a supermarket trolley, which Chris uses for taking out the rubbish, one in a series he has used for the job. He found the first one out by the lamp-post on the curb. "There's often a supermarket trolley out there," he says, nodding towards the Holloway Road. The neighbourhood provides.



Photograph: Amit Lennon/The Observer

Around 4.30pm Sue is sweeping the dining room floor when a customer turns up wanting breakfast. Does Chris ever get exasperated when people arrive so close to closing? "Course not. I'm not here for fun. I'm here to make money." But soon they'll have cleared their plate, like all the others who have eaten here today. The gas will be turned off. The master switch for the kitchen electrics will be flicked. The shutters will come down. It will be the end of another day at the Hope Workers Cafe.

The Hope Workers Cafe, 111 Holloway Rd, London N7 8LT

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