

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD



BRITAIN'S FAVOURITE FOOD, FRIDAY, 8PM, CHANNEL 4

Channel 4 chef Simon Rimmer takes a trip down memory lane, revisiting our favourite foods of yesteryear

Simon Rimmer isn't happy with his Angel Delight. Specifically, the butterscotch variety. It's not exactly terrible, but it doesn't taste the way he remembers it as a kid.

So as part of his new show, *Britain's Favourite Food*, the Channel 4 chef (and ex-*Strictly* star, let's not forget) decides to do something about it. Teaming up with a taste technician, he sets out to create a version of this instant dessert that replicates the one he grew up with. "I want to be transported back to my mum's kitchen as a 10 year old," he tells him.

The results are pretty good and it's the starting point for what, over two nostalgia-tinged episodes, becomes a major excursion down memory lane.

Simon, 54, revisits a whole range of food and drink products for which the nation went crazy in the 70s and 80s – and reflects on how much we've changed as consumers.

Another example is Smash, the instant mashed potato sold back then by Cadbury and advertised

by cute little tin aliens, chuckling at the idea that silly, primitive humans would go to the fuff of mashing actual spuds.

"THESE CONVENIENCE FOODS FELT LIBERATING"
SIMON RIMMER

Simon doesn't bother making his own version of this, mind you, because he wasn't much of a fan. "I remember the first time I was served it," he tells us. "I was so excited. The ad had sold us the dream. And then I tasted it and I thought it was garbage."

But that advert, like many food commercials of its time, was tapping in to the nation's desire for sophistication. Not the sophistication of nowadays, when it's all about fresh, healthy ingredients, but sophistication 70s-style, when chemicals were cool and kind of space age. "That was the industry being sophisticated back then because it had never happened before," Simon

points out. "Suddenly here was this amazing product in powdered form. It meant freedom.

"One of the big things we discover in the series is that these convenience foods felt liberating, particularly with more women going to work. Here was something

that let you create all these flavours just by adding milk, water or whatever."

Vesta curries were another example: "I remember being given one, as a birthday tea, and thinking I was king of the world!"

But it wasn't all powdered stuff in packets. Among

Simon's fondest recollections are 70s lollies. Before many homes had freezers, the ice cream van pulling into your street was a major event.

The programme remembers two lollies in particular. Zoom, shaped like a rocket, was made by Lyons Maid and aimed at boys. Fab, advertised by *Thunderbirds'* Lady Penelope, was made by rival Lyons and aimed at girls. Simon says he actually preferred the latter "although my absolute favourites were Count Draculas. Remember those? Blackcurrant, ice cream and, in the top third, red jelly."

Perhaps hinting at the foodie he was destined to become, Simon was violently opposed to Findus Crispy Pancakes ("The thought still makes me gag") but instantly fell for the taste of garlic, first experienced on a family holiday in Italy in 1973.

Marks & Spencer's Chicken Kievs, oozing garlic butter, were one of the first attempts to sell its delights to home diners in Britain. But when Simon chats to the M&S developer, we discover the product was nearly pulled just weeks before launch. "My boss said, 'You can't put garlic in that,'" she tells

him. "It's foreign – the public won't like it."

Drinks-wise, the series recalls how Blue Nun and Piat D'Or aimed to impress a nation where wine was still deemed a bit alien.

"Suddenly we had this ridiculously sweet product that appealed to a very unsophisticated British palate," says Simon. And Babycham? That was all about persuading women to break with convention.

"Back then it was considered vulgar for women to go to pubs and drink alcohol," he says. "Babycham was the first drink geared towards them."

So it's fair to conclude that times have changed a tad. But however unappealing some of these old products may seem to the modern palate, Simon can't help but recall them with fondness. That tends to be the way with nostalgia.

"It might just be a rose-tinted taste buds kind of thing," he concedes. "Looking back on your past, you edit out the rubbish bits and store the nicer memories. But that's often the way. The world may be in turmoil right now, but in 30 years' time we'll probably say, 'Oh, life was so much nicer in 2018!'"

Mike Ward



From left: 70s ads for Babycham, Smash and Angel Delight