



The Pub Bore

Let Me Tell You a Thing or Two About Portion Control

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Sainsbury's have at last started doing a Taste the Difference ready meal fish pie for one. It's taken quite a few letters to head office to convince them they had misunderstood their customer base. You're alienating millions of people, I said, because not everyone has time to eat with their families, or even has a family. You're making assumptions, I said, which ultimately leads to you missing out on income. You have to put things in their terms so they can understand it, you see. So anyway, last night I was tucking into a smoked haddock, salmon, pollock and prawns pie for one. Although obviously the prawns aren't smoked – on the packaging they're quite clear as to what's smoked and what's not, but for the sake of expediency when telling people about it I tend to leave that out. So I was getting it ready and thinking it was pretty good for four pounds, especially since it's chilled not frozen, which means it's fresh, and better quality. And I was particularly looking forward to the cheesy breadcrumb topping, which is your carbs, and means you don't have to get some mash or a baguette to go with it. Or that's what you'd think. Because in the end, after tucking in, having thought what a nice cosy night this was going to be, I then had to get totally dressed again and go out to the garage in the drizzle to get a pasty because the fish pie, once you've got it out the cardboard sleeve, you can see that the plastic container actually has a big lip all round it that makes it look big when it's in the cardboard sleeve and once you've got it out you can see it's actually quite small. I am minded to write them another letter saying thanks for the pie for one, yours sincerely, Tiny Tim. Or Thumbelina maybe. I mean, where do they get their ideas of portioning from? I ask that disingenuously, because I know exactly where they get their ideas of portioning from. Call me cynical, but also let me tell you this: they get their ideas of portioning from the central standards agency. And then take a fifth off it. They take a fifth off it so that no one is satisfied with what they are told is a full portion. What will that be doing to our psychologies? The next time I buy a pie, I for one will be buying mash for one too. The smoked haddock, salmon, pollock and prawns might indeed have a breadcrumb topping and this may well be the carb, but I will not be full by the end of it. And given that these places have all these focus groups where they test everything out on real people, I know that they will have tested the average portion size. And let me add that I am not what I would call big. I eat a normal and average amount. I can only infer that they know full well how much people eat, and then subtract some so as to make them buy more. This is what they mean by 'portion control'. Because slightly too small portions is clever psychological control. Because a person knows how much they want and they will do what's necessary to get it, and what is necessary is buying more from Sainsbury's, which is exactly

what Sainsbury's want. Interestingly, they do it the other way round with things like laundry capsules and dishwasher tabs. They want you to use too much of their cleaning products so you get through them more quickly. I have deduced over years this key difference between stuff you buy in individual portions when you need it, like ready meals, and stuff you buy as lots of portions in advance of needing it, like laundry liquid. They want you to buy more of both types of stuff, but they have different ways of getting you to do so. In fact they have a lot of ways – which the off-coms and what-coms and ombudsmen all turn their blind eyes to – but I see through them all. I do still have to buy more of everything, of course, but at least not without knowledge of it. One traditional way, banned now in supermarkets, though they still do it in places like Top Shop and petrol stations, is putting sweets by the tills. They banned it in supermarkets because of children, and you don't get so many of those in petrol stations, although I swear some of the idiots on the roads these days are too young to have licenses. Probably all in stolen cars too. But you don't have to be a child to be susceptible to sweets. Myself, I'm partial to chocolate bars, so when I was buying my pasty (actually, a peppered steak slice), I picked up a couple of chocolate bars: a Dairy Milk and a Hershey's. I was tucking in to them while watching the news and it struck me, like these things do – I don't sit down purposely to have ideas, they just come to me – it struck me how funny it is that we think of our cousins over the pond as having really big portions, of being big in themselves too, of everything being big big big, but if you take Hershey's and Dairy Milk, square for square, the Dairy Milk square actually has more chocolate in it. The Hershey's looks bigger, like a long house brick shape, when you look at it straight on, but turn them both side-on and the Dairy Milk is fatter. The Hershey's square – which is of course a rectangle, so a misnomer to be alerted to there – the Hershey's is quite thin. Which is ironic. And now I come to think of it, when I picked them up in the petrol station, the Dairy Milk did feel heavier. I have an uncanny ability to tell the weight of things with my unaided hands. I often entertain people with that. You can blindfold me and place the coins from your wallet in one of my hands and I could put all of mine in my other hand and I could tell you who had the most money. So I could tell that Hershey's had less chocolate in it than Dairy Milk. And while I was there in the petrol station, I thought I should just check the weight – or mass as it's correctly known – of a Toblerone against the Dairy Milk, and I'm happy to report that a Toblerone is still more massive than a Dairy Milk. You probably don't know the correct way to break off a piece of a Toblerone, which is to push one peak towards the neighbouring peak. You don't pull them apart to snap it at the base. You push them together. That way you get a nice neat break in the base at exactly the mid-point between peaks. And while we're on the subject of petrol stations, can I just say how astonishing it is that sandwiches in petrol stations still exist? That anyone buys them in the shadow of the sandwiches in Pret? I mean, who actually wants a sandwich that they know has been made in a light-industrial unit off the A5 near Northampton with meat and cheese all pushed up to the cut but hardly any out to the crusts and packaged up with some dodgy looking label printed off on a bubblejet that says something like Deli Express Italian Club? Or Bestway? Or Grab n Dash? Like the brand name reminds you it's a quick meal so you know why it's so far below today's standards. There's not even any lettuce in it. I'm minded to write in and suggest some alternative names. Something unapologetic like

Full-On Meat and Cheese. They'd have to fill them up a bit more though, what with false advertising and the off-coms and what-coms and ombudsmen. But that would be a sandwich the old Earl would be proud of. If you think about it, so many brilliant things were invented by the nobility back in the day. You had sandwiches, which the Earl came up with so he could eat with one hand and gamble with the other, which is why Sandwich and Deal are neighbouring towns. And you had the great Duke's wellington boots, and the Viscount's biscuits. I don't see our lot today coming up with much. I suppose there's that knight of the realm who invented the bagless Hoover. But it's not like inventing sandwiches or waterproof boots from scratch, it is? It's just a tweak of what was already a thing. But anyway, while we're on the subject of portioning, mine's a pint of best if you're going to the bar.

—— as spoken to Sally O'Reilly

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