BY BETSY STORM

FOOD FORETHOUGHT

Egad, we've been invaded by the British!

One of the most democratic aspects of American food is that, like our country itself, there's room for all nationalities. We're fond of French cuisine, mad for Mexican, taken with Thai. Nor have we forgotten our British heritage; many a local pantry makes space for teas, jams, cheeses, candies and other prepared goodies from Great Britain.

The terribly civilized British ritual of indulging in high tea has taken off here. That success, coupled with the government's jolly good effort to promote native fare, is resulting in a renewed interest in British foods.

That doesn't mean Chicagoans are rushing to dine out at British restaurants. Good English food usually emanates from the home kitchen, anyway. (There are few outstanding English restaurants in America, but one of the best is in Chicago: the handsome and sumptuous Cafe Royal.) "The Brits aren't big on eating out," agrees Tony Matthews, an English transplant who runs the trade group known as Food From Britain out of his home in Marietta, Ga. "The weather in England isn't conducive to dining out frequently, and besides, the Englishman eats so very well in his own home."

Matthews's quest encourages Americans to add British flair to their home cooking, and his research indicates that British food imports into the States are up 30 percent since 1984, when Food From Britain began. In 1987, 29 promotions were orchestrated in more than 1,200 American retail outlets including Marshall Field's, Dominick's, Treasure Island and The Chalet liquor stores.

Marshall Field's recently finished its third British promotion. This year, a performance by the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards, a marching band, kicked off the event at the Old Orchard store in Skokie. "We've really got a feeling for this now," enthuses Deborah Newsam, divisional merchandise manager for the store, "and so do many of our customers." At the downtown store, the Walnut Room served a traditional English tea during the promotion.

At Dominick's, tastings of British cheeses tackle the essential goal of educating the American palate about the finer points of British cheeses. "We do a great job with Stilton, huntsman and Cotswold, in particular," says Margaret Di Matteo, deli/cheese manager for the Dominick's chain. (See glossary below for descriptions of these and other British specialties.)

Sarah Hoskins

Alexandra Everist serves a bit of Britain at her Libertyville tea shop.

It's possible to get a taste of traditional English fare at Libertyville's Oliver Twist Tea Shoppe (299 Peterson Road, Peterson Commons shopping center). Owner Alexandra Everist opened her own little bit of Britain more than two years ago, and her menu is authentic down to the steak and kidney pie that's a favorite repast of the true Brit. As a forerunner to the restaurant, the native Englishwoman ran an imported food business out of her Libertyville home. Anglophiles sought her out for Robertson's black currant jam and Golden Shred orange marmalade, Bisto brown gravy mix ("Brits swear by it") and other coveted British delicacies that are hard to find on this side of the Atlantic.

A burgeoning interest in these products, coupled with Everist's experience in British hotel kitchens and food concessions at local renaissance fairs, convinced her that an authentic tea shop would flourish. "There's a large British population in this area," she explains, "especially around Libertyville, Barrington and Lake Forest."

Everist often "Americanizes" her offerings to suit American tastes. She uses a spicier sausage in some dishes, for example, than would be preferred in England.

Customers who come for breakfast, lunch, high tea or dinner often add to their quite reasonable bill by choosing from a variety of take-out items, including Scotch eggs (hard-boiled eggs surrounded with pork sausage, breaded and then deep-fried) and Everist's best-selling item, Cornish pasties (flaky pastries stuffed with ground beef, fresh vegetables and mushrooms). More than 100 food and gift items are for sale, including auto-