

‘We milked the hell out of it’: what happens after local food places go viral?

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Ben Newman, also known as the Spudman, spends as much time posing for selfies these days as he does selling jacket potatoes from his van in the middle of Tamworth. His shop is the latest viral sensation on TikTok and has seen people travel from all over the world to try his food – jacket potatoes with classic toppings such as butter, cheese and beans – although Newman isn't quite sure why. He joins the likes of Binley Mega Chippy, Get Baked and Wakey Wines as one of a number of businesses to have seen a huge influx of customers in recent years after going viral on social media, sometimes with little rhyme or reason. "It's a tough one to say why everyone is coming. I'm under no illusion that what we do, you can get anywhere. I'm just very good at shouting about it," said the 39-year-old, while serving about 100 customers who had flocked to his van for a spud at 11am on a Monday. As he talks, a teenager comes up and asks if he can record Newman giving a "shout-out" to his group chat, quickly followed by a man asking if he could record a quick hello for his son. Are people coming to Tamworth for him or the potatoes? "I think probably a bit of both," said Newman. "Customer service is just as important to me as the product that we sell." Newman has accrued more than 44m likes on TikTok through daily videos and live streams of life in his van – often offering customers a free potato and recording their reactions. He has been posting on the platform for three years, ever since his son introduced him to it as a way of attracting new customers post-Covid, but business really took off in October. Since then, he's had to take on three extra staff members to deal with the workload. "It is taking its toll on me. But I don't want to miss any opportunities that can come from it," he said, adding that sponsorship deals had allowed him to put on a free day when he handed out more than 2,000 jacket potatoes, while the singer Tom Walker performed in the square. "Maybe I am overdoing it but it might calm down in a month or two, who knows?" he said. People have been drawing comparisons between Spudman and Binley Mega Chippy, the unassuming chip shop in Coventry that went viral on TikTok 18 months ago. Hundreds of people travelled for miles to sample its wares: queues snaked around the car park, people posed for selfies, and some wore custom-made fan T-shirts. Although the hype has died down, the shop still attracts TikTok tourists, easily spotted as they stop to take pictures. Until a month ago, the shop was still selling Binley Mega Chippy T-shirts. The staff who work there have mixed feelings about the summer of 2022 when the shop became famous, bringing visitors from as far away as Australia and Mexico. "It was pretty horrible at the time," said Vinay Yeluri, 27, who has worked behind the counter for about three years. "We had a lot of staff but we couldn't control the crowd, it was all the way down to the road. It was too much. There were TV crews everywhere, people racing sports cars outside. "We're basically back to normal now but we do get kids getting their parents to bring them here on the weekends because they want to see it." He

recalled how staff became overwhelmed, quickly expanding from a team of five to 12, and they struggled to keep fresh produce coming in to keep up with the demand. "There were more than 12 people working and there wasn't even enough room to stand to serve people. It brought in a lot of money though," Yeluri said. Even now, the staff are still confused as to how they achieved such social media success, which seemed to stem from a catchy theme song for the chip shop that they claimed they had no involvement in. "Even we don't know what happened, why it happened. I think it was just kids on TikTok having some fun, someone made the song and it all took off," he said. "People have been coming here for 15 years. Everyone was just like, 'It's just normal fish and chips, what's so special?'" While sometimes social media content takes on a life of its own, others find themselves at the centre of an online flurry of their own making. When the Leeds bakery Get Baked fell foul of government regulations on importing brightly coloured US sprinkles that were banned in the UK, a well-orchestrated social media storm led to a five-fold increase in Instagram followers "literally overnight", said its founder, Rich Myers. The bakery already had a large social media presence through Myers's down to earth and somewhat swearsy posts, but Sprinklegate, as it became known, turbocharged what had been a small shop serving a local area to a national brand delivering orders across the UK. "It was the BBC's most-read article of 2021 worldwide," he said. "We had to close because I was getting that much press and doing so many interviews." As a result, Myers got a book deal and a lot of celebrity supporters, including the chefs Jamie Oliver and Andi Oliver, and the comedian and food podcaster Ed Gamble – fans of the Bruce, a 24-layer chocolate cake inspired by the one eaten by Bruce Bogtrotter in the Roald Dahl book Matilda. For Myers, who is in the process of moving to a larger bakery – though the shop will stay in the same spot in Headingley – and who has also ended up running a separate sprinkles business, there have been no downsides. "We did well to capitalise on the sprinkles thing and turn it into as big a deal as we could," he said. "It gave us an opportunity for something to be milked so heavily and we milked the hell out of it." The same could be said for Mohammad Azar Nazir, the owner of Wakefield Wines, which became a viral hit last year when it was one of the few shops in the UK selling Prime, a "hydration drink" made by the YouTubers Logan Paul and KSI. The off-licence harnessed TikTok to create catchphrases such as "What's the best shop in Wakey? Wakey Wines!", "Abdul come closer, Abdul go back" and "Bingo bingo Gala bingo", and has reached nearly 900,000 followers on TikTok. Customers in the shop came from all around the world, including China, Dubai and New Zealand. "Honestly it's mad, it's bonkers," said Nazir. "It was a surprise, I'm not going to lie to you." Nazir is also working on a book and will be opening a second shop on the same street in the summer, which will focus on sweets. "I'm not good at reading or writing but I'm good at making stuff," he said. "I like to be different from other shopkeepers." But there have been downsides. Nazir said he got recognised and asked for pictures and videos, which his children found "annoying". But worse, last month the shop was trashed by people he said were jealous of his success, who ripped products from the shelves and smashed the windows. Recently, his house windows were smashed. "I'm not going to be intimidated or bullied to leave social media because I don't do nowt wrong, I just do it for my business," he said.