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The Sunday Times

February 12, 2006

Ice cool Brits: Knightsbridge hits the Upper East Side

New York's fashion week showed the return of cool Britannia complete with mushy peas and Curly Wurllys, reports Tony Allen-Mills

The happiest man in New York might be Joe Pascal, co-founder of the Oxonian Society for American lovers of upmarket Blighty. He set up the club a few weeks after the attacks of September 11, 2001 — when Tony Blair was winning American friends with his pledges of solidarity — and it has been gathering popularity with Manhattan Anglophiles ever since.

Last week 200 members — no Oxford degree required — turned out for a date with the novelist Jackie Collins. Later this month Ricky Gervais, hero of The Office, will be the guest of honour shortly before he heads off to David Letterman for a rare appearance by a Brit on one of American television's most popular chat shows.

"A lot of Americans can't get enough of British culture," says Pascal, a chatty Long Islander with a Noo Yawk accent as thick as a Coney Island hot dog. "We set up the society to bring a slice of 'cool Britannia' and the Oxford experience to a wider American audience. And they are eating us alive."

Pascal is far from the only American to be profiting from a resurgence of transatlantic chic. The return of Britmania was one of the strongest themes of last week's New York fashion week.

The cover of Vanity Fair — the glossy monthly that last discovered British culture in its cool Britannia issue of 1997 — currently features Keira Knightley in the nude.

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Over at Vogue, Sienna Miller is the cover Brit. Anna Wintour, the magazine's British-born editor, presided over a promotional drive called "Vogue takes London to New York". British singer Natasha Bedingfield headlined at the main event: a concert where the Union Jack was flying above Sixth Avenue and London Underground signs pointed the way to bathrooms. Across town at the department store Bergdorf Goodman, New York's socialites ate cucumber sandwiches and scones with clotted cream at an afternoon tea held by the designers Mulberry.

On television, Simon Cowell remains America's most hated — and most watched — idol; Hugh Laurie recently picked up a Golden Globe for his performance as an American doctor in the popular television series House; Dame Eileen Atkins and Simon Russell Beale are playing to packed houses on Broadway; and the Rolling Stones performed last weekend at the Super Bowl, America's most popular sporting contest, despite complaints that an event held in Detroit should have featured Motown music.

Even in Washington DC, scarcely the trendiest of American cities, the hottest ticket in town is for dinner with Sir David Manning, the British ambassador whose friendship with Condoleezza Rice, the US secretary of state, lends him more weight than most members of President George W Bush's cabinet.

It all adds up to one of those cosy cultural collisions that — for this month at least — has added an unmistakable aura of hipness to a startling range of British ventures from Boots cosmetics — reaching shopping malls across America soon — to the A Salt and Battery fish and chip shop, the latest addition to Manhattan cuisine.

For one man the timing could scarcely be better. In May, Andrew Bolton, formerly of the Victoria and Albert Museum, will open a new show called Anglomania at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, showcasing the clothes of contemporary British designers set in 18th-century English rooms that were salvaged decades ago from crumbling country houses and transported across the Atlantic.

It is also good news for expatriates like Sam Codling, who set up the London Food Company in Montclair, New Jersey, two years ago. Half of her customers are American — many of whom have visited Britain and are apparently desperate for another taste of Curly Wurlys and mushy peas. Codling expects a good American turnout for her offering this weekend — a tasting of sticky toffee pudding.



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