

# We three Dings: how a small-town burger bar beat the pandemic odds




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**T**he terms ‘pop-up restaurant’ and ‘small town in the north-east of England’ are rarely used together to describe a successful business venture. Throw a pandemic-induced lockdown into the mixture and success appears even less likely. But for Ding, a pop-up burger bar in Hartlepool, success was part of the recipe.

“If you told us you were pretending to be a journalist to get a burger out of us, we wouldn’t be surprised,” laughs Stu Douglass (36). His words are not unfounded. On October 17<sup>th</sup> last year, three friends, Douglass, Jamie Shires (32), and Stuart Setterfield (33), established Ding without any formal cooking or business experience. Today, they sit in the maritime pub where their pop-up operates. Together, they tell stories of residents contacting Ding with any excuse they can muster, from birthdays to pregnancies, to try and grab a coveted yet perpetually sold-out burger.

People hear of flash sales that empty online stores or watch as festival tickets sell out immediately; last year’s Glastonbury Festival tickets were gone in record time. Learning that a pop-up burger restaurant sold a month’s worth of takeaway slots within a minute, however, is a rarer tale. “Missing out on going to Glastonbury is very different to ‘I’ve missed out on some mince in a bun’” observes a bewildered Douglass. And yet, the online excitement for Ding ensues. “Gone in less than 60 seconds. Two phones and one laptop and still unsuccessful. If you’ve already had one and ordered again you’re a \*\*\*\*\*” tweets one user. “Burger Ding, worth the hype.” tweets another. Food that generates reactions of happiness and hype, or even of jealous rage, is evidently the reputation that Ding has established. What is a Ding, anyway?

## **Ding (adjective):**

The mind might stray to the ding of the bell that accompanies a call of “order up” as delicious burgers are served. In Hartlepool, the word’s etymology is different. If you’re a ding, then you’re a ding (though the closest translation is probably idiot).

Ding “means absolutely nothing to anyone outside of Hartlepool,” comments Shires, the brains and head chef behind the company, “it’s a brand immediately.” Their name speaks for itself, just like the specialty menu item:

the smash burger. When asked how this juicy delicacy—served with heaps of pickles and melted cheese—is made, Shires simply retorts “smash it.”

Alongside their name, the team pepper Hartlepool slang across their menus and on social media; smash burgers are “proper sound,” posts are introduced with a “howay then.” As Douglass, Shires, and Setterfield share their experiences, it becomes clear that their branding isn’t a contrived marketing choice, but a genuine product of a homegrown business. Yet if not for Covid-19, there would be no Ding in Hartlepool whatsoever.

The pandemic was a “massive blow,” for Shires who originally planned to open a burger bar in Vietnam. Finding himself indefinitely stuck at home, Shires began to experiment with hundreds of burger recipes on a back-garden grill. As September approached, Douglass was met with the unfortunate news that his wedding had to be postponed due to Covid-19 and when the would-be wedding day arrived, the trio found themselves serving socially distanced non-wedding burgers to their friends. From there, everything “fell into place,” comments Setterfield, “we were comfortable with the knowledge that the food was good, so we already had some success.” However, the team never planned to be a takeaway; “we don’t want to be one,” adds Douglass, who looks forward to reopening as a dine-in restaurant. Like others who started businesses in 2020, the Ding team is caught in a balancing act of owing their launch to the pandemic and constantly trying to adapt to it.

Another reason behind Ding’s speedy success is their relatability. Too often, pop-up restaurants conjure an air of cosmopolitan pretentiousness, of mismatched fusion food that overcompensates with a trendy interior. Such scenes would never work in Hartlepool, where the people are as frank as the food. The town’s countless takeaways clearly hold a special place in the team’s heart as they debate the chicken parmesan (or, parmo)—another north-eastern delicacy. According to delivery service Deliveroo, burgers are the most popular form of takeaway in the UK, although this is not why Ding decided to make them. For Setterfield, burgers are “something that’s already relatable. They’re well within the demographic of what people enjoy, they just might not have had one like this before.” A sentiment Douglass agrees with, who simply adds “Everybody likes an okay burger, so if you can make one that’s better than okay, then wow.”

When it comes to selling, Ding operates solely on Instagram, where they’ve amassed 6,000 followers in just over six months. For reference, that’s almost 10% of Hartlepool’s total population. No small feat considering that, so far, Ding hasn’t paid for advertising or developed any complex marketing strategies. “It’s all been organic,” comments Douglass, “it’s come from other people eating our food and sharing the photos.” But, for Shires, the local fame brings frustration, though only because their small team can’t feed everyone just yet. At the same time, Shires concedes that the unintentionally exclusive nature of his burgers has contributed to their popularity, “if we could feed them all, they’d probably be sick by now.”

Accidental or not, Ding has made an impression on Hartlepool the likes of which no takeaway has before. With their emphasis on sourcing their ingredients from other local businesses, perhaps it’s a case of reaping what they sow. After all, community spirit runs deep in this small, industrial town. Looking toward 2021, Shires hopes to reintroduce that sense of community into Ding as a restaurant and bar when the UK’s lockdown restrictions are lifted. “When people do come back through our doors, you’ll see it,” he comments, “Our full stamp on the thing.” Beyond that, the trio of friends aspires to branch out into other parts of the north-east. When asked why they joke “so we can see less of each other.”