

THE DECLINE OF EATING IN AMERICA

THURSTON MACAULEY

EATING on this side of the Atlantic has become one of the lost arts. Not that the ingenious scientists of this age have given us a substitute for food, though we do hear frequent talk about "capsule meals" of the future, I am optimistic enough to think that such a condition will not be brought about for, at least, many centuries to come. Anyway, the present status of eating is bad enough. Instead of being preserved as the most thoroughly delightful of all forms of social intercourse, — as they should be, — our meals have suffered woefully at the hands of that worst curse of our times, standardization.

Blame, too, the fact that we are a nation of money-makers. The American business man, estimating every tick of his clock in dollars and cents, feels he is losing money if he lingers an hour or so over his luncheon, when he can dash into a restaurant for a hurried snack, sufficient to sustain him until it is time for dinner. On the other hand, the European invariably spends an hour or two in the middle of the day, glad of the opportunity to forget awhile his business trials and tribulations. American *restaurateurs*, realizing this state of affairs, make a specialty of speed. As one example of the extremes to which they have gone in this particular, there is a chain of lunching establishments in New York that proudly advertises on its menus "A Meal A Minute." In the majority of our restaurants the waiters barely give the diner time to finish one course before the next is brought on. The more people served the more tips is, I imagine, the way they look at it.

Writing recently in the New York "World", H. L. Mencken asserted that railway dining cars have done much to lower our standards of eating. He pointed out that the diners transport, from one end of our land to the other, an assortment of foods that are remarkably lacking in any appreciable zest and utterly devoid of appeal to the palate, resulting in a nation-wide sameness of the very worst sort in eating. "Distances are so great," he declared, "in the Federal Union that the man who does much traveling eats most of his meals on trains. So he gets used to dishes that all taste

alike, whatever their ostensible contents, and ends by being unable to distinguish one from another. . . . In a kitchen two feet wide and eleven feet long four or five honest but uninspired Aframericans try to concoct fifteen or twenty different dishes. They naturally spoil all of them."

I agree with what Mr. Mencken maintains about dining cars, but bad though their influence may be, they do not deserve all the blame. The almost innumerable Childs establishments have done their part in taking the joy out of eating. So have the automats, the cafeterias, and the hurry-up lunch counters. Not being particularly statistically inclined, I cannot quote the exact figures as to the number of Childs restaurants that there are to the square mile. But in my own peregrinations I have often had the familiar white front bob out at me at times when I least expected it. Chains of hotels are another reason for standardization in eating. Allowing for slight variations dependent on the local food supply there is scarcely any difference between hotel meals in Seattle and Baltimore.

Prohibition has had a lamentable effect on our restaurants. When beer, wines, cocktails, and liqueurs were relegated to the class of illicit commodities eating became less of a pleasure and more of a matter of routine. Many sinners like myself deem it ever so much more enjoyable to dine with a bottle of Sauterne at one's elbow and top it off with Chartreuse, rather than in the approved Volstead fashion of to-day. A restaurant owner recently told me that it was almost impossible for him to make any profit any more without overcharging his patrons. Before Prohibition, he explained, you could come out ahead, — but to-day! Food alone hardly takes care of overhead expenses. Look, too, at the ever-growing list of famous establishments that have closed their doors of late: Jack's, a landmark on Sixth Avenue, New York, for some thirty-four years; Joel's, a favorite rendezvous of the intellectuals in West Forty-first Street; Browne's Chop House, which dated back to 1857 when it was founded by an actor in Lester Wallack's company; Mouquin's, where the French cooking was worth traveling many miles, and others almost equally well known. While some of the old places, rich in culinary tradition, still linger on, — such as Luchow's on Fourteenth Street, renowned throughout the country for its excellent

German cooking, and the Brevoort and Lafayette, where the French cuisine is *really* French and not merely an American conception of it, — they are but spectre-like visions of their former selves.

One of the few rare occasions when the American business man will not bolt his food and run is the weekly Rotary or Kiwanis luncheon. As a cub reporter on a newspaper in a thriving manufacturing city, I was regularly assigned to “cover” the local Rotarian luncheons. At first I was elated. Newspaper men’s salaries are notoriously little: one good meal a week, at any rate. How I stood it for many months, as I now look back on it, I do not know. Every week the food was just the same. It was most unappetizingly prepared and invariably cold by the time it was set before me. Every week the same booster songs were sung, eulogizing the achievements of their fair city. Every week the same insipid “pep” talks issued forth from the lips of some local oracle, — a garage owner one week, an insurance salesman another week, and an undertaker the next. When an even greener reporter appeared to relieve me of this assignment I experienced a tremendous sense of relief.

In the matter of lunching business women are, it seems to me, in some ways even worse offenders than their male counterparts. Most stenographers and other office workers indulge in an ice-cream soda, a frosted chocolate, or some such frothy concoction, together with an occasional sandwich, at a conveniently near drug store. Others patronize a Schrafft’s in the neighborhood, where, like Childs, the food is expensive and the service hurried in the extreme. At such a place no meal can be taken leisurely, save at an off hour, for there are always people standing about expecting one to vacate one’s seat before the dessert is finished. Rather than eat under such conditions I would almost be willing to go hungry.

I blame the feminine sex for the preponderance of tea-rooms in New York and other centres, where emphasis is laid on furnishings instead of food. The tea-room blight has been the bane of many a man’s existence. To-day not a few urban dwellers, rather than tackle the servant problem, dine out, while still others reside in non-housekeeping apartments, which, by the way, seem to be springing up in great numbers. I know of not a few

husbands whose wives lead them nightly to some "simply *adorable* little place" where dinners of microscopic proportions are served. Like true Spartans they bear their sufferings bravely, though not without certain inward longings for huge and juicy cuts of roast beef and porterhouse steak. Men are not necessarily averse to frequenting eating places that are attractively gotten up; but it is almost too much to expect them to go hungry simply for the sake of interior decoration. Batik hangings and yellow candles are all very well, but they will never take the place of a good hearty meal.

Lest I be set down as a rank misogynist let me state that the fact that a restaurant is run by a woman is not always sufficient justification for condemning it. There are some exceptions, to be sure. One particularly worthy of noting here that comes to mind is Mrs. Beckwith's, which is, for those who relish good foods in plenty, an oasis in the midst of a desert of bizarre Greenwich Village tea-rooms that, no doubt, profit exceedingly on their meagre table d'hotes.

Certain restaurants, such as the one in the Hotel Algonquin, New York, are constantly thronged because of the celebrities and would-be celebrities that are supposed to lunch there. The food at the Algonquin is nothing out of the ordinary, — it is about what one would expect at any fairly good hostelry. The prices are far from reasonable. In one of the dining rooms a table is reserved daily for members of the smart literati, — critics, columnists, editors, and others. Because of the hotel's proximity to the theatrical district an occasional actress or two will drop in from time to time. However, nine-tenths of the luncheoners are girls from fashionable finishing schools getting a thrill at seeing their idols in the flesh or youngsters endeavoring to create the impression that they are in the literary swim. No doubt, many an aspiring author has made all sorts of sacrifices to lunch there now and then, hoping someone may take notice of him. I saw Theodore Dreiser there one day, looking curiously out of place in such a milieu.

Not a few excellent restaurants are spoiled through the simple expedient of being "discovered". Once a place is ballyhooed about as *the* place to go it is as good as ruined. For then the curious ones flock there in droves just because it is the thing to do.

This will explain the reticence of your true connoisseur in eating. He knows better than to tell his friends about his choicest haunts. He wants them to stay as they are, not to become filled with a lot of sight-seers.

Why so many New Yorkers who dine out repair, night after night *ad infinitum* to the very same places, when they have practically the whole world at their door-steps, is more than I can imagine. They may frequent a restaurant where the food is both appetizing and reasonable and the surroundings conducive to good digestion. Though one would think they would tire of it eventually, apparently they do not. In many cases, I cannot help but feel that it is because they do not know better.

For years I have been a diner-out. I have always made every meal a highly fascinating and interesting experience by visiting as many different restaurants as possible. Of course, I have my favorites, where I go more often. One night I journey across the city to Second Avenue for that incomparable soup, *borsch*, at the Russian Bear and to hear the tuneful music of the *balalaika* orchestra. Another night it will be the Roumanian Rendezvous, a little farther down the same foreign-looking thoroughfare. Or, if I feel in the mood for rich, Oriental delicacies I pay a visit to a tiny Syrian café on Washington Street, just off the Battery. Again, craving a selection of hors d'oeuvres, I will go to Henry's, a Swedish restaurant, where the *smörgåsbord* is a treat for all epicures. There, on a long table in the centre of an upstairs dining room are placed, in grand and glorious array, fifty different kinds of hors d'oeuvres. Above is a placard, "Help Yourself, — But Don't Waste."

These are only a few of many. I could go on listing them indefinitely, in my eagerness to explain why eating is something I approach with the utmost anticipation.

Some steps have been made in the right direction, however, — such as the Three Hours for Lunch Club, founded by the amiable Christopher Morley and other kindred spirits. But to me our main difficulty seems to be a failure to make a distinction between the two words, — gourmand and gourmet. When we cease to regard eating as something to be done purely out of habit, finding in it instead untold aesthetic delights, our only regret will be that we did not comprehend earlier.

SONNETS

THE SEAFARING MOON

IT is the moon forbids me to forget,
It is the stubborn, the seafaring moon,
A windy hull with standing canvas set.
Chanteymen keep her silver nerves in tune,
Cloud-shadows scrawl her decks with violet,
Stars catch among her rigging. Very soon
She'll dip and vanish. I shall feel her yet,
Trampling the servile tides that fawn and croon,
Wanting her freedom as I want my own.
You gray gulls storming from the river-mouth,
On the whirled mist, go with her! You alone
Can follow after crying your wild cries.
She is Greek, I think, a ship with painted eyes.
When I last saw her they were looking south.

— *Grace Hazard Conkling*

THE BROKEN CUP

NEVER beside you, but sometimes alone
I wonder what the chipped cup of my soul
Lifts to your lips to drink of; you have known
Lovelier beings; eyes that softly stole
Upon your face, nor gazed as my eyes do
Unwinkingly at yours with thoughts that crowd
For utterance. I search my memory through
Until I wake the ghosts and cry aloud
Finding some old despair. Too many doors
Are locked and yet fly open at a touch,
Revealing pierced hands and running sores;
These are not gifts to offer you as such.
Nothing I have for you, unless it is
My loving you despite my knowing this.

— *Amory Hare*