



EATING AESTHETICALLY

ALICE FOOTE MACDOUGALL

LITTLE did I think, when I first began to formulate ideas of what a restaurant should and should not be, that I would eventually put these ideas into practice.

I am one of the old-time New Yorkers who were brought up on three square meals a day and who always ate these three square meals in a home built around these functions. Breakfast was at seven thirty. We did not say "half after seven"; that sounded too elastic. Seven thirty was seven thirty, not seven twenty-nine or seven thirty-one. Punctually at this time we began a meal that was more substantial than most dinners to-day — fruit, oatmeal (the real Irish kind that takes at least twenty-four hours to prepare), hot bread, sausages, buckwheat cakes and maple syrup, coffee with loads of sugar, and cream we could cut with a knife. The other meals were in keeping; and why apoplexy was not epidemic with us, no one save a wise and benevolent Providence can say.

So it was not strange that consternation entered my soul, when, coincident with my business career, came the problem of eating in restaurants. Few can realize the misery of that period of adjustment. In place of dainty linen on the tables, there were coarse cotton substitutes, and these none too clean. In place of delicate porcelain, of pretty and alluring design, china so thick that I felt I needed to build an extension on my lips to drink from it. In place of restful ease and quiet conversation, the crash of endless dishes, as maids — rough-shod — ran back and forth shouting orders, their trays missing my fear-stricken head by what seemed a miracle. By the time the food arrived, my appetite was gone. I gobbled down what was placed before me from a sense of duty to my pocketbook (you must have your money's worth if you're poor) and fled, to have indigestion ever afterward.

Giving up restaurants in despair after one or two such experiences, I tried soda fountains, and many times I have stood and wondered if something could not be invented to conceal the unpleasant view of nastiness behind the counter from the eyes of those who stand outside. At the same time I envied the uncritical eyes and cast-iron indifference of my fellow customers. But, being among those who are sensitive to ugliness and uncleanness, another avenue of nourishment was thus lost to me, and in my despair I preferred to let my midday repast consist of water that was cold, from a glass that was clean, in the quiet of my own office.

Quite early in my business career, food ceased to be an object of prime interest or necessity. I was very busy, very much preoccupied with my many problems; but I became acutely concerned about the food question for my employees. I found to my horror that my frail little stenographer subsisted on a slice of really dreadful apple pie for luncheon, and that doughnuts were prominent in the menus of my stalwart office boy. This forced me to enter into communion with myself and once more I asked the same question I had asked before — “What price restaurant success?” I never expected to answer the question in terms of restaurant management, but I did look forward to the time when a few conveniences would make a decent midday meal possible for the people I employed.

Among the things that seemed inexplicable to me was the fact that one was compelled either to eat under altogether nauseating conditions at low prices, or else to pay fabulous prices for food

at the more desirable restaurants uptown. And the portions puzzled me almost more than the price. Why couldn't the stewards shade their prices a little by reducing the portions served? Surely, I thought, this could be done to the mutual advantage of the public and the restaurant owner: the public would welcome good food at lower prices, and by attracting more patrons the plan would be practicable from the point of view of the management.

Gradually there grew in my heart a real sympathy for the great hungry public that either had to eat like animals at prices they could afford to pay or impoverish themselves to secure a little of the beauty we all crave as an accompaniment to our food. As I lived through the agony of the war, gradually the thought came to me that the all-important duty of each one of us was to grow toward that condition that would eliminate war by developing in ourselves love instead of hate, generosity instead of avarice, open-mindedness instead of bigotry, beauty instead of ugliness.

I always think of myself as an average human being. My wants, my inclinations, my pleasures and my pains are pretty much those of the rest of the world. In running my restaurants, I almost invariably shun those things which are unpleasant to me and insist upon giving my customers those things that I, myself, want to have. There is nothing particularly alluring about long rows of tables, standing like shrouded sepulchers in winding sheets of more or less unsanitary tablecloths. The eye demands food quite as much as the body. On the other hand, the extravagance of cubistic and ultramodern art do not seem to me conducive to peace and a good digestion. It may be charity to the Russian refugees to eat in a restaurant where wild splashes of red, yellow, and green dart at you from every corner, but I can't think it very restful.

To insure restfulness for my customers I have selected neutral tints and soft colors. My Italian interiors were the result of a necessity on my part; I had to meet and conquer the hideous bleakness of an office building with its iron girders and lengths of plaster walls, far longer and higher than that of the ordinary dining room.

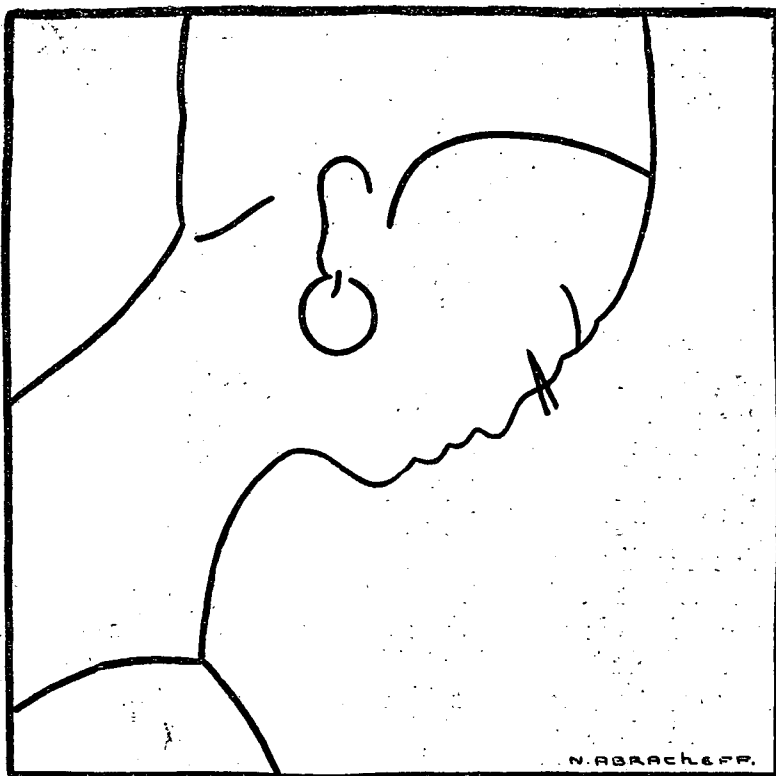
I have tried to gauge the wants of the public by my own desires, but have always tried to be flexible. I have not wanted to hold the public by its nose and administer my favorite dishes to it

as a wise mother now and again gives castor oil. Some of my pet dishes have had to be scrapped because of an undiscerning public, and many delicious dishes are not even attempted because they are so unfamiliar. In all the world there is no better food than our American food when it is well cooked. But all the emphasis must be placed upon its quality, its preparation, and the service.

Shades from my restaurant-eating days of those swift-flying, highly poised trays dripping gravy and carrying destruction to one's nerves, still haunt me, and in my own restaurants soft-spoken, slow-moving colored women administer more gently and less noisily to the guests. Of course, there are drawbacks to our methods. A few days ago a gentleman came in for the proverbial "bite." Chloe was waiting on him and was all too slow to suit the hurried gentleman. So he told her to make haste. Whereupon Chloe, having evidently listened with attentive ears to my oft-repeated lectures, said, "You can't be artistic in a hurry."

Business is difficult and the restaurant business is no exception to the rule. But business loses much of its unpleasantness if one introduces into it things that are purely altruistic — consideration, an honest interest in making your customer a guest, and a constant endeavor to treat him as such. With us, business has been robbed of all drudgery by our constant effort to improve and vary our menus, our methods, and our environment. We have attempted to give the same minute care in the production of food for a thousand that you give for the one or two in your home. We have introduced the principle of beauty, without which no food is complete, no human being contented — beauty of surroundings and beauty of service, in the thoughtful consideration of our customer's wants and an obliging willingness to meet them. When these principles are observed, a restaurant becomes a place so soft in tone, so harmonious in coloring that the soul finds recreation there as well as the body.

In the last analysis, working for others should be the keynote of all business, especially in the restaurant where personal contacts are intimate and frequent. Altruism and beauty always and everywhere, not alone because, in a very real sense, it is bread cast upon the waters, but because it pays in commercial success and in the comfort it brings to one's soul in the realization of a job well done.



**BRAZILIAN
DRAWINGS
BY
NICOLAI ABRACHEFF**

GIRL FROM PERNAMBUCO