

When We Americans Dine

A Symposium on the Great American Dinner

(On October 17 we commented editorially on an "American dinner" that was served to Mr. Lloyd George in the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. In our next issue there was a spirited criticism of this editorial by the Drifter, and thereafter the rain of correspondence which poured into the office suggested that the subject had aroused more interest and passion among our readers than the occupation of the Ruhr, the price of coal, or the shortcomings of the administration at Washington. So we referred the controversy to several of the authors of articles in our series on These United States, with the request that they would serve the readers of The Nation with a home dinner typical of their section of the country. They responded enthusiastically; dinner is served.)

The Supremacy of Beefsteak

By WILLIAM ALLEN WHITE

AMERICAN cooking is in general bad—both public and private. But at that it is better than English cooking. Domestic science taught in the schools and colleges has helped only a little; too often making our cooking decorative, inept, and given to fruit salads, boiled mayonnaise, paper frills, and striped ice cream. But good American dinners may be had in any community. In every town or village is always at least one righteous woman who can cook. And yet whole sections of the land, groups of States, have not one professional man cook worth naming, and no hotel cook who has either distinction or even rudimentary capacity to fry sour apples!

The American dinner typically is seasonal and served somewhat in the degree of familiarity with which the guest is known. In summer an American dinner would contain fried or broiled spring chicken and strawberry shortcake—made with actual shortening. After the strawberries go, comes corn on the cob, blackberry cobbler or green apple dumpling—American dishes of excellence to go with the young chicken. When young chickens become passé, turkey appears with its trimming; and then pie—pumpkin pie, apple pie, or mince pie—is part of the typical American dinner, and the glacé sweet potato, the parsnip, and the rutabaga. Of course ice cream, which of late years has been universally over the earth served, is rather typically American.

Now all this is the company dinner; the dinner for the stranger guest. But when he has been in the house for a week, or if he is a dear and trusted friend, he is served with a beefsteak of parts and consequence—cut two inches thick, broiled "rare," and served with sauce or without it. The beefsteak is American. It is one of the things which may be found in American homes served better than in public—that is in homes where discerning Americans live. A beefsteak is the most American of our dishes. No other nation knows it—this big, thick, rare, four-pound, T-bone steak, seared over on each side and broiled slowly after the searing without anything in the pan—no grease, no water, no foolish condiments. It is not regional. It is as accessible in Seattle as in Palm Beach. But a good beefsteak is the same on

every American table. Around it any dinner that is built scientifically becomes rather keenly American. But it is not the "company" dinner. That clusters around fried chicken, roast turkey, baked ham, or some sectional sea food.

No man ever gets a typical American dinner at a New York hotel. The better the hotel, the less likely one is to get an American dinner and the worse it will be when it is served. Our best hotel cooks have the European tradition. Their American accent is always bad.

À La Maryland

By H. L. MENCKEN

EATING is no longer practiced as a fine art in Maryland. There are, in fact, not three public eating-houses in the whole State where decent victuals are still to be obtained, and even in private houses there has been a melancholy falling off in my time. Prohibition, of course, is to blame. The old-time Maryland gentry are not rich; in the main they can't afford to buy wines and liquors at the current bootlegging prices. So they cease to entertain, for they can no more imagine inviting a civilized guest to a dry dinner than they can imagine putting him to bed with the hogs.

For many years there was a standard Maryland dinner, served with few variations on all festal occasions, public or private. It began with olives and celery, proceeded to a plate of thin soup (usually mock turtle), then to Chesapeake Bay oysters on the half-shell, then to terrapin in the Maryland style, then to roast wild duck, and then to some modest sweet or ice, and coffee. Sometimes a salad was added. If so, it consisted of hearts of lettuce with thin slivers of Maryland country ham; the dressing was always olive oil and vinegar—much more vinegar than oil. The terrapin, always served with terrapin eggs, was stewed in Madeira; the vile cream sauces favored in New York were absolutely unknown. The duck was served bleeding if the guests were New Yorkers, but rather well done if they were cultivated Marylanders. The oysters were always large; no Marylander ever ate a small oyster. The only condiment put upon them was a drop of lemon juice.

With this dinner there went an invariable program of alcoholic beverages. Cocktails were very seldom served; the first drink was almost always a glass of dry sherry. With the terrapin came champagne and with the duck some sound red wine, usually a heavy Burgundy. With the coffee came a liqueur—almost always fine brandy. The highly flavored and scented liqueurs were never served save when harlots were present. After dinner it was proper to put a bottle of Madeira on the table, or, failing that, port.

Such dinners are now only dreams. Prohibition has extinguished them, save in the homes of profiteers. Even the profiteers, alas, can't bring back the past. The Chesapeake Bay oyster has been going downhill for a dozen years past, canvas-back ducks have become extremely scarce, and genuine diamond-back terrapins are almost unobtainable. The Marylander of today eats the common fodder of the republic. Like all other Americans, he has been ironed out.

Where Pie Is King

By DON C. SEITZ

NEW England does not run to course dinners in the ordinary daily fare. The housekeeper usually "contrives" one dish with trimmings. Certain days have a specified menu. Thursday, for example, is the day of the "boiled dinner." This consists of a considerable piece of corned beef cooked with turnips, beets, carrots, and cabbage—plenty of "rubbage," it will be observed. Dinner is a noon, not an evening meal. Supper is light except on Saturday evening, when baked beans and brown bread are insisted upon. If there is company, in fall when the porkers are ripe, this bill of fare may be accepted as perfect:

Baked beans
Roast Spare ribs
Baked potatoes
Biscuit and butter
Pumpkin pie Apple pie
Indian pudding
Tea

Indian pudding is a delicious compound of corn meal and molasses, served with cream. Pie is the universal dessert and adorns most meals, including breakfast, north of a line running from Bellows Falls, Vermont, to Portland, Maine. For Friday, fish chowder is the dinner dish. It is best made from cunners, a fish with firm, sweet flesh, frequenting the rockbound bays of Maine. The chowder is embellished with round "Boston crackers" split in half. Pie and coffee in large cups, with milk, completes the repast. "Broiled scrod"—haddock or young cod cut across the grain—is a favorite breakfast dish. Codfish tongues with pork scraps is another. Portland will not eat flounders, our own filet de sole. There they are "mudfish." Salt codfish is an important item of food. Boiled with beets and served with pork scraps (cubes of salt port fried brown), it is considered delectable. If any is left over, it can be chopped fine and "het up" for breakfast as "red flannel hash." Doughnuts and coffee go with every breakfast, as well as pie. For a supper, ginger cookies and tea serve. The pie allowance for a well-regulated Maine family of five is twenty-one per week!

When Company Comes in Tennessee

By E. E. MILLER

A TENNESSEE dinner, in October, for a welcome guest—a farm dinner, of course, since city dinners, like cities themselves, trend away from the individual and toward standardization.

Country dinners shape themselves around one central dish, and at this season that dish is foreordained. Fried chicken it must be—not the little spring chicken, the creature of a few ounces and a few mouthfuls, but a lusty, coop-fed fellow at the limit of frying size, each drumstick a juicy and satisfying portion, each piece of breast flake after flake of tender whiteness. He is fried just to a golden hue, the skin crisp but not crackly, piled piece upon piece into a great pyramid on a broad platter, choice of cuts and abundant second helpings for all. We give the preacher fried chicken when he comes, or Cousin Dave from the next county; it is what we should give a prime minister if he came; for in all the length and breadth of this lavish land there is nothing better to give.

On one side of the master-dish waits the plate of boiled ham—disks of piquant pink tastiness that quicken appetites anew. On the other, the big bowl of gravy and the yellow, syrupy sweet potatoes—who has not eaten chicken gravy and sweet potatoes has something yet to live for.

Butter beans, too, and okra steaming hot, and scarlet tomatoes crisp and cool. Hot biscuits, inevitably—soft, thick, fluffy biscuits that divide at a touch and melt on the tongue, never a crust about them, only a hint of brown on top and bottom. Rivaling them, brittle corn sticks into which the butter fairly flows.

And jellies—that glass of royal wine-color is blackberry jelly; that clear red is apple; that shimmering gold is peach. More jellies than we can get around to, but our hostess, in wholesome pride, may offer us along with them preserves of equally varied colors and equally intriguing flavors.

We countrymen do not care much for the courses with which dinners may begin. Fried chicken is for us a good enough beginning; but dessert there must be, and the desert of apple-ripening season is prince of them all. Long before it comes into sight tantalizing fragrances drift in to us from the kitchen, and when it appears every eye brightens and every nostril widens. Apple dumplings? The winiest-flavored apples fresh from the orchard, gently baked and slowly simmered a long, long time in a deep earthen dish, a garment of flaky crust about them, sugar and butter and the spices of Araby in their hearts. We pour over them a sauce of liquid sunshine and the dinner rises to its ecstatic conclusion.

Preacher, prodigal, visiting cousin, revered celebrity from distant lands—the guest has been well fed.

In the Creole Capital

By BASIL THOMPSON

THE American dinner to my untutored palate is as much a mystery, and will, I blush to confess, remain so, as tatting or Miss Stein's "Tender Buttons." But here, down in "Ny Ori'ns," it is a pleasant task to catalogue the victuals and vintages (in the French ménage of means and a cellar this latter item is still featured) that find their way into the anatomy. You are, we will say, a modest fellow of some importance. You have been invited to dine at the home of a prominent Creole family. If your host is a gentleman and a pirate, and he is usually both, an ojen, a Martini, or a Sazerac cocktail (he will assure you if the last is proffered that his man mixes them with a skill equal to that of the head bartender at the old Royal Street establishment) is thrust under your nose and you sip not unreluctantly thereof. Perhaps he is well stocked and plies you with another; and perhaps a third, in which event dinner takes on color. You are properly placed. The stage—beg pardon, the table—is set. The man, a sepia-toned old South Senegambian, yassahs and 'scuse-me's in the best tradition. Is it oysters on the half shell or shrimp cocktail? Either is right. Is it crayfish bisque or consommé of fowl or mock turtle (not gumbo at a course dinner)? It is soup in any event. Hors d'œuvres? Well, as you will, from stuffed olives to paté de foie gras. Fish? Broiled pompano, sheepshead à la Normande, snappers. With the arrival of the entrée, if your host is true to form, a pirate and a gentleman, you have had with your soup, sherry; with your fish, white wine; and are beginning to feel—well, just a bit drowsy; full is more like it. You