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Food—I Sing of Thee!

by Marie Bernds

I SING of food—not of the chemistry of food, nor the role of food in the body nor yet of the preparation and manufacture of food, but of the pleasure of food. I know of no greater pleasure than the pursuit of the study of foods as they are served before one in restaurants, tea rooms, cafeterias, and, yes, even in hamburger shops.

It is enjoyable eating in restaurants that achieve an authentic foreign effect.

Aside from traveling abroad, there is nothing to equal this as a means of getting a sense of sympathy and understanding of foreign customs.

Take, for example, Berghoff's Restaurant in Chicago, where is served the sort of food and drink that has developed many a prodigious German abdomen. The place itself is rather bare and business-like, with furnishings and woodwork of heavy dark wood and no effort at all wasted on what might be termed fume, fipple or frills. It is essentially masculine in design and attracts more male customers than female. Also, waiters, not waitresses, serve the customers.

Perhaps the food is so heavy that mere females cannot carry it! The dinners served here are of the very substantial type featuring such things as wiener schnitzel, sauer braten, potato pancakes, Thuringer sausages, spare ribs with sauer kraut, and roast fowl. Of course, plenty of potatoes or noodles are included, often both. The Germans do not seem to care for the light and airy concoctions known as salads, but apparently the imagination of the creator stopped short of this development.

One very tricky restaurant near Los Angeles is known as the "Round Table." This place has no reference or likeness to the round table in King Arthur's Court. It consists of a huge circular counter table at which the guests sit and help themselves to an array of foods which pass by them on a slowly revolving inner counter. The main course and beverages are served in the usual way by ordering from a waitress, and the price is governed by the choice of meat. However, everything else in the meal, such as cocktails, breads, hot rolls, butter, appetizers, salads of many varieties, and desserts ad infinitum, makes a complete circuit of all the cash customers.

I do not remember a thing about the appearance of that restaurant—whether it was furnished in the style of Louis XIV or of a 1932 hot dog parlor; I cannot even recall very well what food was served, except that I certainly got my 50 cents worth. My one vivid recollection is of the deliciously novel table that slowly went around and around and permitted one to repeated selections of food.

Some eating places, among them cafeterias, lunch counters, sandwich shops, and soda fountains by the hundreds, artfully make their customers uncomfortable so that the average time spent by a customer over a meal is cut down to the minimum. These might be termed "quickies." In them, the seats are uncomfortable, a busy boy is forever scurrying around collecting empty dishes as fast as they appear, and the bright lights combined with shiny white furnishings produce a glare that influences the customer, whether he is conscious of it or not, to hurry on and go elsewhere.

Lights in a restaurant have a great deal to do with the turnover in customers during meal times. Dimly lit tea shops are famous places for lingering and lounging. The proprietors, to make a profit, almost have to charge their customers room rent. One coca cola palace at the University of Illinois, features very dim lighting. No matter how poor business may be, the place always appears crowded, because the customers dawdle even as long as 2 hours over a nickel coke.

The modern Triangle Restaurants in Chicago aim at no arty atmosphere; they do not attempt to transport their customers in imagination to the Orient, to Europe, to ye old Colonial days, nor yet to the inside of a Brown Derby, or to the heart of the Wild West as is done in one restaurant by having seats like Western saddles. No, indeed.

The one wild extravagance in these restaurants is in the wording of their menus. They are literary gems, shining with superlatives. The author of these menus is a literary artist. The menus actually defy the Idaho baked potato and the American classic—ham and sweets.

Let me try to emulate: "Tender, mealy luscious potatoes, fresh from Idaho, the picturesque land of the super potato, selected out of thousands of other potatoes as the pick of the crop, baked to perfection, and brought to you, steaming and dripping with golden butter."

No, it won't do; I can never hope to write menus for the Triangle.

The best of it is that when the waitress brings the order, the rhapsodies have come true. The specialties of this restaurant are really as they are so gloatingly portrayed. The Texas tomatoes are huge, meaty, and flavorful; the ham is pinkly tender and delicious; the canteloupes with berries are as juicy and tasty as can be obtained; and the strawberry shortcake is a creation dripping with delight.

All of which brings me back to my original premise: Food is such a pleasure!