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Dining in a Diner

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GONE are the days when Mrs. Jones packed an elaborate box lunch for Susie and Bobby to eat on the train when they went to visit Grandma. Gone are the odorous banana peels and greasy fingers from fried chicken. Gone are the stains on the cushion where Bobby upset his pure homemade lemonade. Now the Joneses eat in the air-conditioned dining car, and—take the service for granted.

While the Jones children were growing up, clever engineers and architects were devising ingenious methods to serve 300 meals a day from a kitchen smaller than that of an average six room house. The cooking space in a dining car is costly and every inch of it must be efficiently used.

If Susan Jones, who is now a Mrs., doesn't think she has enough room in her apartment kitchen to wash dishes, she should take a lesson from the dining cars of a large railroad company. It is the usual thing in a dining car to wash and dry a thousand pieces of china at one meal time. Also there are the silver, glasses and cooking utensils to be considered.

These miniature restaurants have a wide range of requirements. Which meals are served and at what hours depend on such things as the length of the train run, the season of the year, and the type of passengers. Overnight runs must serve breakfast and the all-day runs must of course include the three meals.

But these are not all the complications. Dining car departments must be ready for all emergencies. If the travel becomes unexpectedly great, they must be ready to provide a second dining car and crew for the over-loaded trains. There is also the problem of stocking the dining cars. It takes master managers to know how many provisions to send on each of the cars. The service strives for two requirements: to meet all reasonable demands of the passenger and to have a minimum of waste.

Of course, records are carefully kept and averages determined to aid in stocking the cars, but the averages cannot always be depended upon. It is possible to estimate that out of one hundred luncheon customers, so many will want soup, so many sandwiches, and so many salad bowl. But, knowing how many to expect is the big guess in the game.

The number of travelers is often boosted by unforeseen events which can be prepared for in advance. Such meetings as races, conventions, Congress and football games tax the railroad food service to the fullest extent.

In emergencies such as these, the dining car will often pack box lunches—quite different from those Mrs. Jones used to pack—and as many as 1,000 of these have been served over a period of 20 minutes. Some of the preparations for such demands are made at the central station. The sandwich meat will be cooked and sliced and the cakes baked.

Obviously, the railroads need much food to carry on this service. Many of the larger railroads buy the entire output from truck or egg farms. They all have central kitchens at their stocking commissaries, located at principal cities across the country. These kitchens prepare such foods as pies and cakes and ice creams in advance and try out new recipes and quick cooking methods and utensils.

Cooking in a dining car is different from a regular restaurant sized kitchen. The demands on the employees are such that they must be specially trained and, therefore, the dining-car crews are all selected men. Before going to work on the train each man must go to a training school in one of the cities where a commissary is located. Here he learns his responsibilities and how to fulfill them with mutual advantage to the customer and the railroad for which he is working.

The menus and recipes which are presented to the public are planned at the central commissaries by highly trained individuals. Every aspect of service and cookery is carefully supervised and kept on the highest plane.

Truly representative of the age in which we're living are these railroad dining cars, demonstrating to the last degree the possibilities of planned economy and maximum efficiency. Now when Robert and Susan send their little ones home for a visit to Grandma, they don't worry about packing a cold box lunch. They know that for a reasonable price, the darlings will get pure, hot, nourishing food on the railroad dining car.