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New Zealand Cuisine As Tasted by an "Ag"

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New Zealand Cuisine
As Tasted by an "Ag"

Parry Dodds brings food memos from his journey to the Near East

DAWN of a frosty August morn finds us shivering under three blankets and a heavy quilt in a New Zealand hotel. It is late winter here in August and even a hotel with central heating is uncomfortably cold.

A knock at the door—without further warning, a maid steps into the crisp room with steaming hot tea and cakes, sets them on a table in a distant corner and departs. Up I jump, pour out two cups of tea, grab a handful of cakes and cinnamon rolls and the Rotorua morning paper; set one cup, some cakes and the paper by my traveling companion and climb into bed to thaw out inside with my cup of scalding tea.

Shortly, around eight o'clock, we hear the gong sound for breakfast—one consolation, the dining room is really heated. Dressed in appropriate August winter clothing we rush down "miles" of corridors (the hotel is built on but one level and covers the entire block) to the dining room. We lost our way twice the night before, but this time our noses find the way first try.

The menu consists of compote of fruit (apple sauce); choice of cereals; fried fresh fish; ham and eggs, pork sausages and bacon; fillet steak or lamb chops; eggs: boiled, poached, fried or scrambled; toast, preserves and tea, coffee or cocoa. Coffee comes half with milk unless one explains to the waitress that he wants it black. Then she'll doubt his sanity.

Toward noon, most of the guests gather by the fire in the front sitting room after a brisk walk to the six block business district or to the hot water baths. (Why couldn't they use all that hot water from the geysers to heat this building?)

For lunch the waitress offers three choices of meat, or a sort of mulligan stew or meat pie. The meat is inevitably mutton, lamb or roast beef or roast pork, always cooked in the same way. For "Sweets" there is an English steamed brown pudding, or a custard and perhaps ice cream.

To drink milk, the American must pour it out of the large cream pitcher. Although New Zealand is probably the greatest fine quality butter producing nation in the world, they consider milk a food for babies and don't have thick cream, so we learn to pour our milk out of the large pitcher in the middle of the table.

Tea time is at four and we gather in the back lounge where the hotel manager and his wife entertain with tea and sandwiches.

Come dinner time, around quarter past seven, we sit down to a table decked with white linen table cloth and seven pieces of silverware; a soup spoon the size of a round table spoon and a long fish fork are the only utensils not quite like ours on the dining table of an American hotel.

Clean, heavily starched napkins, called serviettes, are folded into peculiarly shaped hats between the table service. At the tip of the fish fork is one small dry piece of bread, and at the tip of the meat knife is a tall goblet, unfilled. It will remain unfilled until we ask the waitress to fill it. Then if she sees we are Americans, she'll go out to the kitchen and get ice so that we can have ice water. New Zealanders consider tomato juice and ice water the great American beverages.

At the center of the table is a bright vase of Iceland Poppies, the favorite wintertime flower. There is no bread or butter at the table and no indication of any forthcoming, so we ask the waitress for butter and more bread. She stifles a gasp at our audacity and conveys our wish to the head waiter and the cook and they contrive some way to satisfy our wishes with the least display of surprise.

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