

Ten Restaurants That Changed America

J

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INTRODUCTION BY DANNY MEYER



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ENTRÉES DE BŒUF.		BEEF.	
Beef-steak aux cornichons	s. d.	Beef-steak with pickles	
" au beurre d'anchoix		" with anchovy sauce	
" à la sauce tomate		" with tomato sauce	
" à la Montigny		" Montigny fashion	
" aux légumes		" with vegetables	
Beef-steak Américain		American beefsteak	
Filet de bœuf, sauté		Tender-loin with sauce	
" " aux olives		" with olives	
" " aux tomates		" with tomato sauce	
" " aux champignons		" with mushrooms	
" " au vin de Madère		" with Madeira sauce	
Entre côte de bœuf à la sauce			
Langue de bœuf à la sauce		Beef's tongue with sauce	
ENTRÉES DE VEAU.		VEAL	
Filet de veau		Fillet of veal	
Poitrine de veau à la sauce		Foreast of veal with sauce	
" " farcie		" " stuffed	
Tendon de veau aux légumes		Tendon of veal with vegetables	
Veau à l'Impériale		Veal dressed Imperial fashion	
" à l'Impératrice		" " Empress fashion	
" à la bourgeoise		" " family fashion	
Cotelette de veau panée		Veal cutlet, breaded	
" " aux truffes		" " with truffes	
" " aux champignons		" " with mushrooms	
" " en papillote		" " in paper	
" " à la sauce Robert		" " with Robert sauce	
" " sautée dans sa glace		" " with gravy	
Blanquette de veau		Veal with white sauce	
" " à la Périgieux		" Périgieux fashion	
Escalope de veau		Veal scalloped	
Fricandeau au jus		Fricando of veal with gravy	
" aux épinards		" " with spinage	
" à l'oseille		" " with sorrel	
Carbonade de veau		Carbonade of veal	
" aux petits pois		" with green peas	
" aux fines herbes		" with herbs	
Ris de veau piqués		Veal sweetbread, larded	
" " à l'oseille		" " with sorrel	
" " à la financière		" " financier fashion	
" " aux champignons		" " with mushrooms	
" " aux truffes		" " with truffes	

Fig. 3. A page from the 1838 Delmonico's menu.

DELMONICO'S AMERICA'S FIRST RESTAURANT

Before Delmonico's opened in New York City there were already restaurants . . . of a rudimentary sort. Although no one knows for sure, the first American restaurant might have been Julien's Restarator, established in Boston in 1794 and modeled on what was offered in Paris, the world's gastronomic capital.¹ But in the United States there was very little dining out, apart from taverns, lodging houses, and stands selling street food such as oysters. What was available was hardly luxurious. European travelers were often taken aback by the crudeness of the new country's culinary offerings, the slipshod rapidity of dining, and the absence of leisurely conversation imposed by the emphasis on speed and quantity rather than enjoyment and quality. An English visitor in the 1820s sniffily recalled the spectacle of fifty to a hundred hotel guests sitting down to breakfast and consuming a motley array of dishes in less than ten minutes. The main midday meal usually required no more than twenty minutes, and while the food was being voraciously gulped down, no conversation took place. Another traveler describes the atmosphere of one eating house as that of

a funeral in its absence of conviviality, and otherwise as a contest to see how quickly one could finish what seemed to be regarded as an unpleasant task.² Edward Henry Durell, briefly mayor of New Orleans during the Civil War, wrote in 1845 that American businessmen (as opposed to the more leisurely French Creoles) took a mere five minutes to devour dinner. The Anglo-Saxon race might be generally superior, he opined, but not in matters involving the delicate perception of taste.³

With its fine French food, immense menu, efficient service, and gracious atmosphere, Delmonico's seemed a revelation. It began as a simple pastry shop, opened in 1827 by two brothers from the Alpine canton of Ticino, the Italian part of Switzerland. By 1830, the success of what was already considered a delightful oasis in the bustle of New York induced John (originally Giovanni) and Peter (Pietro) Delmonico (originally Del-Monico) to expand their establishment into a restaurant that would offer impeccable French cuisine worthy of Paris. Neither brother had restaurant training, although Peter had experience as a pastry chef. Nevertheless, they were successful, not only with pastry but with hundreds of sophisticated dishes. The oldest surviving menu from the "Restaurant Français des Frères Delmonico," an eleven-page document from 1838, shows an astonishing mastery of French gastronomy: forty veal dishes ranging from sweetbreads to blanquette de veau; no fewer than eight preparations of partridge; and four styles of venison. The ubiquity of imported French truffles on the menu is remarkable. Truffles accompanied meat dishes but were also available by themselves *en crouste* or sautéed in Champagne. There were vegetables such as artichokes, endive, sorrel, and eggplant, which had rarely if ever before been seen in America.⁴

That the menu was not simply an inflated pretense is evident from the response of the restaurant's patrons. Louis Napoleon, the future president and then emperor of France from 1849 to 1870, visited New York in 1837 and dined regularly at Delmonico's.⁵ Among the most devoted early clients of Delmonico's was Samuel Ward (1814–1884), the son of a prominent

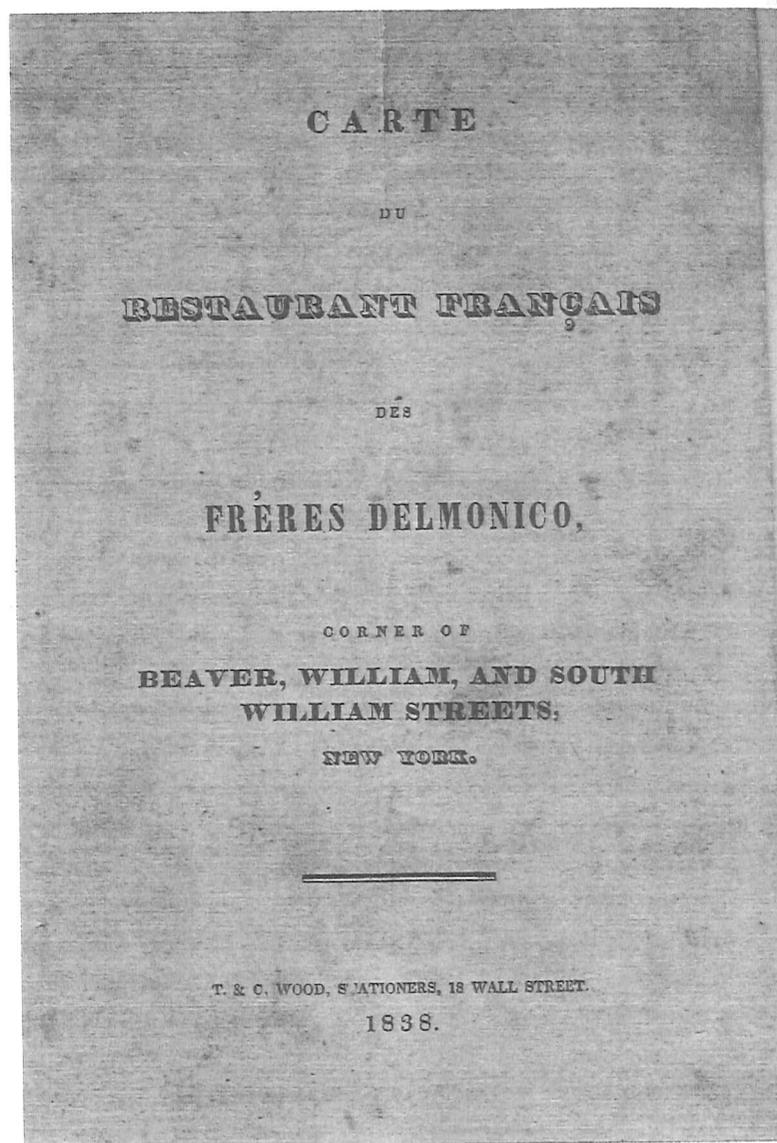


Fig. 4. Cover of the 1838 Delmonico's menu.

banker. Ward made and lost more than one fortune in speculation and in the California Gold Rush but found his true vocation in Washington, perfecting the modern form of congressional lobbying in the Gilded Age following the conclusion of the Civil War. Ward first discovered Delmonico's when it was still a pastry shop, and he was struck by its "prompt and deferential" service, so different from the "democratic nonchalance" of eating houses. Ward wrote an unpublished and unfinished history of Delmonico's in which he particularly praised the variety of its food. Besides presenting a definitive French repertoire, the restaurant's culinary range encompassed "the Caviare of Archangel, the Polenta of Naples, the Olla Podrida of Madrid, the Bouillabuse [*sic*] of Marseilles, the Cassola of Santiago de Chili [*sic*] and the Buffalo Hump of Fort Laramie."⁶ In fact, Archangel is in northern Russia, far from the Caspian Sea where caviar comes from, polenta is a northern Italian rather than Neapolitan staple, but no matter—the distinction of Delmonico's, Ward's statement notwithstanding, was not so much international variety as a combination of reliable service and elegant French cuisine.

SETTING THE STANDARD

It is hard to exaggerate Delmonico's influence. It set a pattern for what fine dining meant for the nineteenth century and had many worthy and successful imitators, maintaining its reputation until it was killed off in 1923 by the effects of Prohibition. In 1890, as in 1840, everyone agreed that the greatest restaurant in the United States was Delmonico's. It was admired despite an enduring American tradition of mistrusting gourmandise and exalting rugged simplicity and democratic values.

Disdain for gastronomic pretentiousness has often influenced politics.⁷ During the 1840 presidential campaign, the incumbent Martin Van Buren was portrayed as routinely eating fricandeau de veau and omelette soufflé,

or in another attack, enjoying pâté de foie gras from a silver plate followed by soupe à la Reine sipped from a golden spoon. His opponent, William Henry Harrison, an aging hero of the War of 1812, was extolled for his simple tastes, by contrast, favoring raw beef without salt, and he adopted a campaign image of a "hard cider man." In fact, Van Buren was the son of a tavern keeper, while Harrison was a member of the privileged class, but mere facts are often unimportant in politics. Harrison deftly exploited American anxiety about luxury and snobbery and won the election, though he would die within a month of taking office, the raw beef and hard cider perhaps having taken a toll.⁸ American history evolves, but it repeats certain patterns and prejudicial inclinations in such a way that more than 160 years later, George W. Bush's presidential campaign mocked John Kerry's fluent French while the wealthy, dynastic president's man-of-the-people image was carefully nurtured by publicizing his love of pork rinds.

A concern for fine food has often been seen as unbusinesslike or unmasculine. Women were supposed to enjoy fripperies and delicate cooking. Yet not only does it turn out that men often like well-made food, but restaurants attracted them by offering an elegant setting conducive to strengthening business ties and affirming status. Within just a few years of its founding, Delmonico's fulfilled social as well as gastronomic functions seemingly effortlessly. Writing in 1884, a contributor to *Harper's Weekly* recollected the howling wilderness of pre-Delmonico's dining, remarking, "We shall not think it extravagant to call Delmonico's an agency of civilization." Delmonico's taught those who assumed it frivolous to give attention to dining that "dinner was not merely an ingestion, but an observance."⁹

A year after the *Harper's* article, Oscar Wilde, who had visited America in 1882–1883, wrote a similar paean to Delmonico's. Reviewing a book entitled *Dinners and Dishes*, Wilde took the author to task for underestimating American cuisine. How could he ignore the nation's marvelous soft-shell crabs, canvasback ducks, bluefish, and pompano, especially as served by Delmonico's? In fact, Wilde continued, the two most impressive sights

in the United States were Delmonico's and Yosemite Valley, the restaurant having "done more to promote good feelings between England and America than anything else has in this century."¹⁰

The New York that received Delmonico's with such *éclat* in the 1830s was a metropolis that was neither the capital of national government nor a seat of learning on the order of Boston or Philadelphia. It was given over to business, and its size and population were expanding rapidly. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 had opened the port of New York to the agricultural wealth of the Midwest. The development of the railroads in the following decades made New York into an international manufacturing and distribution center, the headquarters of the financial world, and a magnet for immigration. Its population of 60,000 in 1800 had more than quintupled to 312,000 by 1840.

In 1831, the year after the Delmonico brothers created their restaurant, Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States, and his famously perceptive account probes Americans' manners, desires, and outlook. *Democracy in America* remains among the most thoughtful descriptions of the young nation. Although de Tocqueville doesn't devote any space to American gustatory habits, he describes the ways in which democratic mistrust of snobbery, luxury, and other Old World vices was undermined by an individualistic desire to compete and to achieve status in a society without formal titles, orders, or guilds. America might be businesslike and its pace hurried, but its prominent citizens did not altogether ignore the pleasures of the table. Thomas Jefferson, for example, was a serious gourmand, kept records of French recipes, and insisted that his slaves learn how to cook authentic French food. He had a distinguished wine cellar and had pasta shipped from Italy along with a "maccaroni machine" to make his own. His good taste was not universally acclaimed: Patrick Henry said that Jefferson "came home from France so Frenchified that he abjured his native victuals."¹¹

Neither the advent of Jacksonian democracy in the 1830s and its appeal to rural values nor the widespread mistrust of the eastern seaboard and

its upper classes did anything to hinder the success of Delmonico's. The "great march of the suddenly rich upon the social capitals of the nation," as one observer looking back from the vantage point of 1911 called it, created opportunities for all manner of elegant restaurants. All of these were modeled after Delmonico's. The much-imitated restaurant guarded its preeminence, managing to retain old-money clients while drawing in the flood of new wealth. Though one Gilded Age observer described Delmonico's as "a salon of Saracenic splendor," the restaurant was by no means inaccessible or frozen in a particular moment of elite culinary style.¹² As New York's Theatre District and social center moved uptown, first to Fourteenth Street after the Civil War, then to Madison Square, and finally to Times Square in the waning years of the nineteenth century, Delmonico's followed without abandoning its original branches in the downtown business center.

Delmonico's always claimed to be a French restaurant, but it was especially known for American specialties such as oysters, diamondback terrapin, and canvasback duck. The bays and inlets around New York once produced oysters of immense size, fine quality, and staggeringly large quantities before pollution and reckless harvesting destroyed their banks. While in France oysters were usually eaten raw, in America they were served raw at the beginning of the meal and then appeared baked, broiled, in soups and stews, or cut up and made into patties. The best canvasback ducks were from around the Chesapeake Bay, where they fed on wild celery. Usually they were roasted or broiled fairly simply and served with celery sauce, hominy, or samp (a kind of dried and pounded corn kernel). Terrapin was complicated to cook, to say nothing of the preliminary necessity of killing the turtle by scalding it and then separating out the edible from inedible parts. The finest terrapins were also thought to be from the Chesapeake region, although people in New Orleans disputed this.

The Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope visited Baltimore during his North American tour at the opening of the Civil War, and he called canvasback ducks and terrapin the city's twin glories.¹³ Americans boasted about

these two dishes; Gen. Winfield Scott, a hero of the Mexican War and the best-known antebellum gourmet, observed that canvasbacks and Maryland terrapin were the “supreme native delicacies.”¹⁴ In Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, written about the 1870s, the Lovell Mingotts serve canvasbacks, terrapin, and vintage wines and the Newland Archers’ first festive entertainment as a married couple features a hired chef and gilded menus that indicated either terrapin or canvasbacks would be presented.¹⁵

It was not just the quality of the food but also the refined and delightful atmosphere of Delmonico’s that was renowned. In *The Bostonians*, published in 1886, Henry James’s narrator describes Verena Tarrant’s anticipatory pleasure at the prospect of a meal at Delmonico’s, “a bright consciousness, sufficient for the moment, that one was . . . to dine at Delmonico’s . . . There was enough of the epicurean in Verena’s composition to make it easy for her in certain conditions to live only for the hour.” Verena is escorted by the wealthy Henry Burrage, who seemed to “preside in the brilliant public room of the establishment, where French waiters flitted about on deep carpets and parties at neighboring tables excited curiosity and conjecture.”¹⁶ The spectacle was both gastronomic and social. Henry James depicts Delmonico’s as a splendid but sterile space for Burrage to perform in, opposing to it a sedate French restaurant favored by Verena’s more serious (and priggish) suitor, Basil Ransom, that offers wonderful food in a more quietly luxurious space than ostentatious Delmonico’s. For James, no fan of New York’s aggressive materialism, Delmonico’s fame was taken as obvious.

ORIGINS

The Delmonico brothers were adaptable, quick learners. Before coming to America, Giovanni had gone from the mountainous Swiss canton of Ticino to become a sailor and he was rapidly promoted to captain. He com-

manded a schooner that traded in Cadiz, Havana, and New York. Pietro, of a less adventurous temperament, opened a pastry shop in Berne. Giovanni decided to give up his ship to settle in New York and, after a brief stint as a wine merchant, he convinced his brother to help him establish a pastry shop in the prosperous but gastronomically impoverished new metropolis. John and Peter, as they now styled themselves, had substantial capital. They immediately distinguished themselves by the quality of the basic products they offered: excellent coffee, thick and deep-flavored hot chocolate, and luxurious pastries. The brothers exemplified the entrepreneurial virtues of constant innovation and the practice of reinvesting profits in one’s business. Delmonico’s became distinguished, as already stated, by the range of its menu, punctilious but friendly service, and most of all by the care lavished on cooking even the simplest dishes. Delmonico’s did not invent fine food but rather refined it and the manner in which it was served.¹⁷

The Delmonicos paid high wages and attracted European chefs. Not satisfied with the quality of produce they could procure in the markets of New York, the brothers bought a 220-acre farm in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 1834. That same year they acquired a hotel on Broad Street, which proved fortunate because the great fire of December 16, 1835, destroyed Delmonico’s restaurant, along with most of lower Manhattan. The hotel was intact, however, and immediately became the site of a temporary restaurant while a new one was constructed at Beaver and South William Streets. It opened in 1837, a year marred by another sort of disaster: a financial panic that wiped out fortunes and led to many business failures. The new building was three and a half stories and it featured novelties for New York such as private dining rooms and wooden parquet floors. Its immense wine cellars held a veritable city of 16,000 bottles. In later years, as other Delmonico’s locations were established in the city, the old Beaver and South William Street branch was known as the Citadel.¹⁸ It was henceforth the spiritual home of the enterprise, and although the building was later reconstructed in 1891 as an eight-story edifice, the original entrance portico of marble



Fig. 5. Photograph of "The Citadel," Delmonico's at Beaver and South William Street, early twentieth century.

Corinthian columns still stands, taken (supposedly) from the ruins of Pompeii. That grandiose portal still invites diners into a restaurant that, although not directly descended from the original, is called Delmonico's.

LORENZO THE MAGNIFICENT

As it turned out, the most important event in perpetuating the reign of the Delmonico brothers was the arrival in 1831 of their young nephew Lorenzo, who would mold the restaurant into an unrivaled temple to gastronomy and a shrine to upper-class social status. He did not do this alone;

his younger brothers Siro, François, and Constant joined him, and along with his nephew Charles (son of François) they would be instrumental in running the business. From the 1840s until his death in 1881, however, Lorenzo was clearly in charge.

Unlike his uncles, Lorenzo did not Americanize his name. Although he had been brought on as a distinctly junior partner, Lorenzo became the animating force of the restaurant considerably before John's death in 1842 from a stroke while hunting and Peter's subsequent retirement. Lorenzo's retention of his Italian name might seem to indicate a certain flamboyance, but he was in fact quiet and retiring, to the point of asceticism. Earnest and unpretentious, his strengths were conscientiousness and imperturbability rather than charisma.

Under Lorenzo's management, Delmonico's became the first restaurant to serve as a gathering place for an elite that had previously dined and entertained at home. As with other high-end restaurants in the century to come, such as Le Pavillon or the Four Seasons, the constant presence of the owner or maître d'hôtel and his skill at managing as well as welcoming guests were indispensable for the restaurant's social distinction. Lorenzo could be firm with clients who failed to obey the clear, if unwritten, laws. Two basic rules were to pay your bills on time (regulars were given lines of credit rather than being presented with a check after each meal), and not to become obviously drunk or rowdy. Offenders would find that after some disorderly incident or in response to failure to pay their debt within a certain grace period that the next time they would suffer a quiet but public humiliation. Arriving at the restaurant, the offender would be warmly welcomed and shown to his usual table. His order would be taken with dispatch, but no food would follow. The waiter would apologize and promise to see what could be causing the delay in the kitchen, but still nothing would come forth. Apologies and promises would go on until the miscreant realized he was never going to be served anything unless restitution were made.¹⁹

According to legend, an even harsher penalty was meted out to one Ben Wenberg, a sea captain who in 1876 supposedly showed Lorenzo and Charles how to cook lobster tableside in a chafing dish. The name of this new and popular preparation, Lobster à la Wenberg, was allegedly changed to Lobster à la Newberg after Wenberg started a brawl in the restaurant. This is hard to verify, as no such dish as Lobster à la Wenberg is found on any surviving Delmonico's menu. Terrapines à la Wenberg appears on a menu dated May 2, 1873, and there is a Terrapin à la Newberg in the 1893 cookbook of Charles Ranhofer, Delmonico's chef, so perhaps the story originally was about terrapin, or the name was changed without dramatic motive.²⁰

Like all brilliant restaurateurs, Lorenzo was a restless innovator, not just a manager. He was ceaselessly altering the business to maximize profits, but also to serve a varied clientele in a rapidly changing New York City. He gave up the Williamsburg farm as the food-supply infrastructure improved, and he personally supervised the purchase of meat and produce from the Washington Market downtown (destroyed for development projects in 1962), near where One World Trade Center now stands. Often accompanied by his brother Siro, Lorenzo was a favored customer at the market, where he would arrive at dawn. He would return to the Citadel and await his orders' arrival by delivery vehicles. He would drink a cup of strong coffee, smoke a cigar or two (made in Havana to his specifications), and look over the accounts and reservations lists. After a nap he would go to the front of the house to supervise the coming and going of diners.²¹

EXPANSION

Lorenzo was more than a restaurateur devoted to protecting one perfect establishment. He was a pioneer in expanding his brand. The restaurant moved with the changing geography of New York's social life, but

without vacating all its former locations. It could not be described in any sense as a "chain" in that each Delmonico's was different in layout, staffing, and menu. There were ten sites in the history of Delmonico's from 1830 to 1923, but never more than four restaurants were in operation at one time. The different Delmonico's restaurants served a varied clientele, from simple clerks to arriviste magnates and old-money plutocrats, but in different rooms and at different sites. By offering a number of options under one name, Lorenzo was able to preserve an aura of refined exclusivity and at the same time prosper financially. A stable of reliable relatives under his employ obviated some of the problem of supervision.

Running several restaurants in the same city under one management differs from guarding one unique location, as is the practice at other famous restaurants such as Antoine's, the Four Seasons, or Chez Panisse. Neither does it resemble the international growth pursued by today by chef-entrepreneurs such as Alain Ducasse or Jean-Georges Vongerichten. As a strategy, it has something in common with Danny Meyer's group of distinguished restaurants in one city (Union Square Café, Gramercy Tavern, Maialino, and others), but Meyer's restaurants emphasize different cuisines while Delmonico's consistently followed the only recognized haute-cuisine type, French, albeit with some admixture of American methods of preparing local foods.

Lorenzo's first expansionist innovation was to open a second Delmonico's restaurant in 1846 as part of a hotel run by Delmonico's at 25 Broadway near the southern tip of Manhattan. Along with the New York Hotel farther uptown, this establishment was among the first in the United States to charge meals separately from rooms, making it less like an inn or boarding house and more like a pair of distinct enterprises. An equally dramatic development was that a substantial bar was installed that attracted more customers than a small, more leisurely, pastry-oriented café. Not only was the appeal of strong drink irresistible, but one could stand at the bar to obtain solid as well as liquid refreshment quickly and depart.²²

For a time, the hotel was a stunning success. Jenny Lind, the world-renowned Swedish opera singer, stayed there in 1850 and 1851. With tickets to her concerts in Castle Garden at the Battery auctioned by scalpers, she sang arias in front of the hotel to crowds that thronged Bowling Green. Probably among the first women to be able to command a table on her own, Jenny Lind dined at Delmonico's after her performances. The fastidious epicure Gen. Winfield Scott often dined with Lorenzo. William Tecumseh Sherman, the future Union general, brought to the hotel the first news received in New York of the 1849 California gold discovery. The Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth stayed there, as well, as did the renowned English author of *Vanity Fair*, William Makepeace Thackeray.²³

The hotel's success notwithstanding, Lorenzo was restless and unhindered by emotional investment in any particular property. A mere ten years after it had opened, the hotel was closed and a restaurant (only) was opened a bit farther uptown, near City Hall, at Chambers Street and Broadway. The new establishment, which would last from 1856 to 1876, was advantageously located around the corner from A. T. Stewart's splendid dry-goods store on Broadway. Stewart's sold fabric, trim, clothes, and furs in a setting commonly described as a "marble palace." In the 1850s it became the largest store in the world and attracted multitudes of female shoppers. As we will see in our discussion of Schrafft's in a later chapter, these women would patronize restaurants called "ice-cream saloons" set up for their custom in the neighborhood of Stewart's.

Delmonico's at this point did not encourage trade from women unescorted by men, but the Chambers Street branch attracted a lunch crowd of male retail and legal clerks from the neighborhood along with the more distinguished clients. Samuel Ward recollected that the outer ground-floor room was for the clerks, along with lesser politicians and contractors. A more formal dining room on the same floor catered to small-business owners, while "men of distinction," including A. T. Stewart himself, dined in a grand second-floor room. At night a less business-oriented and more

purely social elite monopolized the premises, where, Ward remembered, the laughter of young ladies filled the air.²⁴ Lorenzo continued to devote most of his time to the Citadel, assisted by his brother Constant. Chambers Street was supervised by Siro and Lorenzo's precocious nephew Charles.

MOVING UPTOWN (1862–1881)

In the seemingly inauspicious war year of 1862, a mere six years after establishing the location at Chambers Street, Lorenzo opened a third Delmonico's on Fourteenth Street in the new theatre district just west of Union Square. Under the care of Charles Delmonico, despite the economic woes associated with the Civil War, the restaurant became the center of New York society. While it was condemned by some as a meeting place for Confederate sympathizers, who were surprisingly numerous in New York, and though its rival, the *Maison Dorée*, was more staunchly Unionist, political divisions did no significant damage to Delmonico's reputation or profits.

The chef at this new establishment was an indefatigable Frenchman, Charles Ranhofer. He was the greatest cook of his generation in America, and he would serve the Delmonicos for thirty years. The prominent families of New York, who had previously held their receptions, balls, and celebrations at their homes, now found it more pleasant and convenient to have their refined, if ostentatious, events at a restaurant. Opening-night dinner at Fourteenth Street consisted of a modest eight courses and included French classics such as *Timbales à la Monglas* (meat, mushroom and truffle timbales) and *Filets de Volaille à l'Imperiale* (chicken filets with cream sauce and forcemeat tarts). There were also trout from Long Island and canvasback ducks from the Chesapeake.

The Fourteenth Street restaurant flourished even before the disruptions of the Civil War came to an end, and it became the scene of some of the grandest meals of the Gilded Age of postwar prosperity and tax-free

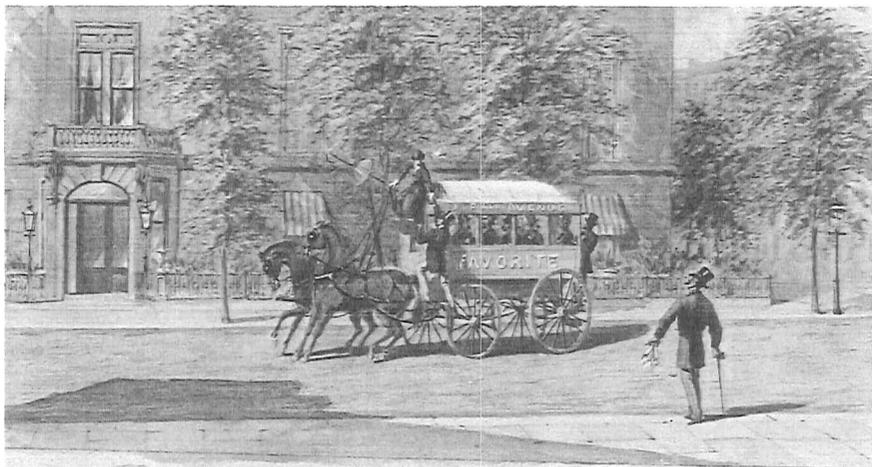


Fig. 6. Watercolor of the exterior of Delmonico's
Fourteenth Street at Fifth Avenue, ca. 1875.

excess. The Russian fleet's visit in November of 1863 provided one of many occasions for a grand banquet. Russia was the only European power to unequivocally favor the Northern cause in the Civil War, and so there was a strong effort to publicize the diplomatic and military implications of this gesture of support.

Whatever its reputation for harboring a pro-Confederate element among its clientele, Delmonico's went all out on behalf of the Unionist hosts of the banquet. Thirty-one dishes made up the first four courses, followed by no fewer than twenty desserts and then fifteen *pièces montées*—sugar-sculpted tableaux and effigies. These depicted the Hermitage Palace, the Parisian Arc de Triomphe, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, a horn of plenty, and similar inspirational and historical themes. Game birds were ubiquitous in this meal, so that—in addition to a canvasback duck pâté—snipe, woodcock, pheasants (in two varieties), and ortolans also appeared. Just a year later (when it was clear that the North was winning

the war), a visit from the French Navy occasioned a meal with only a few courses served to a mere twenty-six guests.²⁵

In late 1865, with the Civil War concluded, the British railroad magnate Sir Morton Peto hosted a dinner notable in the long annals of banqueting excess. At the cost of a mere \$50,000, equivalent to more than \$700,000 today, 250 men in the tea and coffee business were treated to a nine-course meal that included seven *pièces montées*, twelve desserts, Salmon à la Rothschild (whole salmon stuffed with whiting, covered with decorated fish-based crusts, and served with Champagne sauce, sole filets, and skewers of smelts); Pheasants à la Londonderry (breasts of pheasants with truffles, tongue slices, and a meat ragout); saddle of venison; ducks; game; eels, beef . . . The wines included an 1815 sherry, Imperial Tokay, and Napoleon brandy. The menus were printed in gold leaf on satin, and each guest was given a silk cushion embroidered with his initials.²⁶



Fig. 7. Confectionery Department at Delmonico's, ca. 1900.

Three years later, in April of 1868, Charles Dickens, the world-famous author of *David Copperfield* and *A Christmas Carol*, was honored by the New York Press Club on his second voyage to the United States. Although there were eleven courses, this meal was restrained compared to the grotesquely large, tedious, and rather plain dinner given at the City Hotel in New York during the author's first American trip in 1842, a meal that Dickens recalled with contempt. The Delmonico's menu was imaginative and reflected the literary tastes of New York's upper class: timbales à la Dickens, stuffed lamb à la Walter Scott, grouse cutlets à la Fennimore Cooper. Dickens used this occasion to retract criticisms of Americans made after his previous visit, when he characterized them as rude, vulgar, and uncivilized. In an after-dinner speech, he remarked how touched he was by the courtesy and consideration received during this second voyage.

These extravaganzas took place at what was considered "the most palatial [restaurant] on the continent," located along the East-West thoroughfare of Fourteenth Street, center of nightlife and the theatre.²⁷ In the decade after the Civil War, there were four Delmonico's locations. In 1865, Lorenzo opened an additional downtown venue on Broad Street right by the New York Stock Exchange, welcoming stockbrokers and investors during one of America's many eras of speculative exuberance. Chambers Street catered to Boss Tweed when Tammany Hall ran the city government. Fourteenth Street was thronged with members of high society and notables of the entertainment world. Apart from the venerable Citadel, however, no branch of Delmonico's had a particularly long heyday. In 1876, with Manhattan's social center continuing its march uptown, Lorenzo closed Fourteenth Street in favor of exploiting the new social hub at Madison Square and shuttered Chambers Street, reestablishing a second downtown presence on Pine Street in the Equitable skyscraper, where 1,000 diners could be accommodated daily. These changes show Lorenzo's attempts to cater to the social elite while making money from a well-heeled but essentially mass-market clientele.

The Delmonico's restaurants managed to profit from the excess of the times without being tarnished by it, perhaps because of a certain unerring good taste behind the spectacles or else because of the self-effacing if ambitious personality of Lorenzo. He satisfied the whims of the nouveaux riches without alienating what passed for old money in New York. Beginning in the 1870s, under the patronage of Mrs. William Astor (née Schermerhorn), the social elite was marked out by Samuel Ward McAllister, a cousin of Samuel Ward and equally devoted to Delmonico's.

Aghast at the effect of new money and the consequent erosion of exclusivity, McAllister identified "the 400," who, by virtue of their background (roughly four generations of distinction) and quiet wealth, were entitled to deference and consideration. An inner circle of 25 of the original 400 organized the first "Patriarchs' Ball" in 1872. The restricted but glittering event was replete with Astors, Schermerhorns, Rutherfords, and Livingstons, and invitations were rigorously vetted by McAllister. Subsequently, these events would take place several times a year during the social season. Although considered something of an odd character (and financially dependent on his wife's family wealth), McAllister's decisions were nevertheless accepted by the press and public as authoritative demarcations of social distinction.²⁸

By 1876 the grand hotels and restaurants were concentrated around Madison Square, where Broadway met Fifth Avenue at Twenty-Third Street. In 1879 the first Madison Square Garden was built at Madison Avenue and Twenty-Sixth Street. The new Delmonico's was a block away, at Twenty-Sixth Street and Fifth Avenue. The wealthy public, distressed by the closing of the Fourteenth Street Delmonico's, nevertheless trusted Lorenzo's judgment. The *Herald* expressed confidence that "the new quarters and the magnificence of the surroundings will atone for the loss of the old."²⁹ Customers were pleased with the mirrors, silver chandeliers, a flower-banked central fountain, and the frescoed ceiling of the main dining room. Upper floors had private rooms, a banquet hall, and a ballroom. The

Patriarchs' Balls were held in the ballroom and adjacent supper rooms, but the new aristocracy of Vanderbilts and other industrial magnate families also hosted sumptuous dinners and parties there.³⁰

The pioneer at Madison Square was the venerable Fifth Avenue Hotel, established in 1859. Not long after the hotel opened, the social observer Reuben Vose wrote that within its precincts pass "more of the real beauty and wealth of the nation than in any other spot in the city."³¹ Other elegant establishments on the square were the Café Brunswick, nearly as celebrated as Delmonico's; the St. James Hotel; and Gilsey House, the latter of which was popular with theatre people. The devastating Panic of 1873, resulting clashes between the police and New York's unemployed in 1874, and the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 did nothing to discourage the hordes of socially prominent gourmards from thronging Delmonico's. Perhaps the perceived need grew for the wealthy to separate themselves from the nouveaux riches and expanding upper middle class.

Lorenzo himself was given little time to enjoy this latest example of his prescience and success. He suffered from gout and from what medical opinion at the time considered nicotine poisoning, brought about, it was said, by his habit of consuming thirty or more of his custom-made cigars daily. His death at the age of sixty-eight on September 4, 1881, provoked consternation in New York comparable to that greeting the news of the assassination of President Garfield just two months earlier. The *Sun* credited Lorenzo Delmonico with improving the standards of cookery throughout America and for making New York second only to Paris as the city with the greatest restaurants. The *Times* remarked that the Delmonico name was everywhere understood to be synonymous with gastronomic perfection.

The encyclopedic *American National Biography* series echoes the obituaries of 1881 in giving Lorenzo credit for running restaurants that were "the equal of the best in the civilized world." The modern author of the entry, Jerome Mushkat, goes on to say that Lorenzo "turned eating into

a form of entertainment."³² This is true to the extent that the restaurant became a setting for the rituals of social prominence. Only later, at the end of the nineteenth century, would fine restaurants embrace music, dancing, themed décor, and other distractions. For Lorenzo and for Delmonico's, the paramount distinction was always the food. How food was served and in what setting were important as far back as the pastry-shop days, but it was the gastronomic experience that was most important and uniquely delightful.³³

Lorenzo's demise was followed in 1884 by the bizarre death of his nephew and close collaborator Charles Delmonico at the age of forty-four. Considerably younger than Lorenzo, Charles was afflicted by what appears to have been a bipolar disorder that left him increasingly listless, morose, and irritable. Although he was able to supervise the restaurants, he went through periods of inactivity and his appearance and affect deteriorated. In the fall of 1883 he was taken to Long Branch on the New Jersey Shore to undergo a "rest cure" at the house of a friend. During a bitter cold spell after New Year's Day, 1884, Charles disappeared. After three days some torn letters, telegram vouchers, and gloves belonging to him were found by boys playing near railroad tracks passing through the Jersey Meadows near Newark. More than a week passed before Charles's body was found in a ravine between the towns of Orange and Montclair, New Jersey. It was frozen, covered with ice from a stream at the bottom of a gully. Later it was revealed that Charles had escaped from what amounted to involuntary confinement, boarded a train, and was overheard to have said he was going to visit the famous but disgraced General McClellan of Civil War fame who lived near Montclair.

Contrary to what one might have expected, the two deaths in the family did not set back the fortunes of Delmonico's. Charles's nephew Charles Crist, son of his sister Rosa, took over, changed his name to Charles Delmonico, and was known as "Young Charley" to distinguish him from his unfortunate uncle. He had trained as a stockbroker, but took

easily to managing the business from Madison Square, though toward the end of his life he moved to the new Forty-Fourth Street location. Although not completely unrivaled, Delmonico's continued throughout the 1880s to dominate the New York and national dining horizon.

CHEF CHARLES RANHOFFER

The food style of Delmonico's, French with American accents and ingredients, was in place long before the arrival of Chef Charles Ranhofer in 1862, but his reign in the kitchens until the 1890s coincided with the height of the restaurant's prosperity and distinction. We know a lot about what was served at Delmonico's because of Ranhofer's massive cookbook, *The Epicurean*, published in 1893, an unrivalled reflection of high-end gastronomic taste during America's version of the French Belle Époque.³⁴ Its 3,700 recipes allow us to understand what kind of French and American food was prepared. The cuisine reflected the classic French repertoire of its time, but many of the signature dishes will be unfamiliar to the twenty-first-century reader: salmis (game in small pieces in sauce, often prepared at the table), chartreuse (an elaborate arrangement of meat and vegetables cooked in a mold), tiny birds such as woodcock or ortolan, or haunches of meat such as saddle of mutton or venison. The same degree of unfamiliarity applies to American specialties requiring ingredients that are now so endangered as to be virtually unknown—canvasback ducks, terrapin, prairie hens, shad, and Atlantic Ocean or Maine river salmon.

As with almost all famous chefs at American restaurants well into the twentieth century, Charles Ranhofer was European; not only that, but he was actually French. Born in 1836 in St. Denis just north of Paris, cooking was in his blood, as both his father and grandfather were chefs. At the age of twelve he was apprenticed to a pastry chef in Paris. He had a number of short-term positions and developed a high reputation very quickly. While

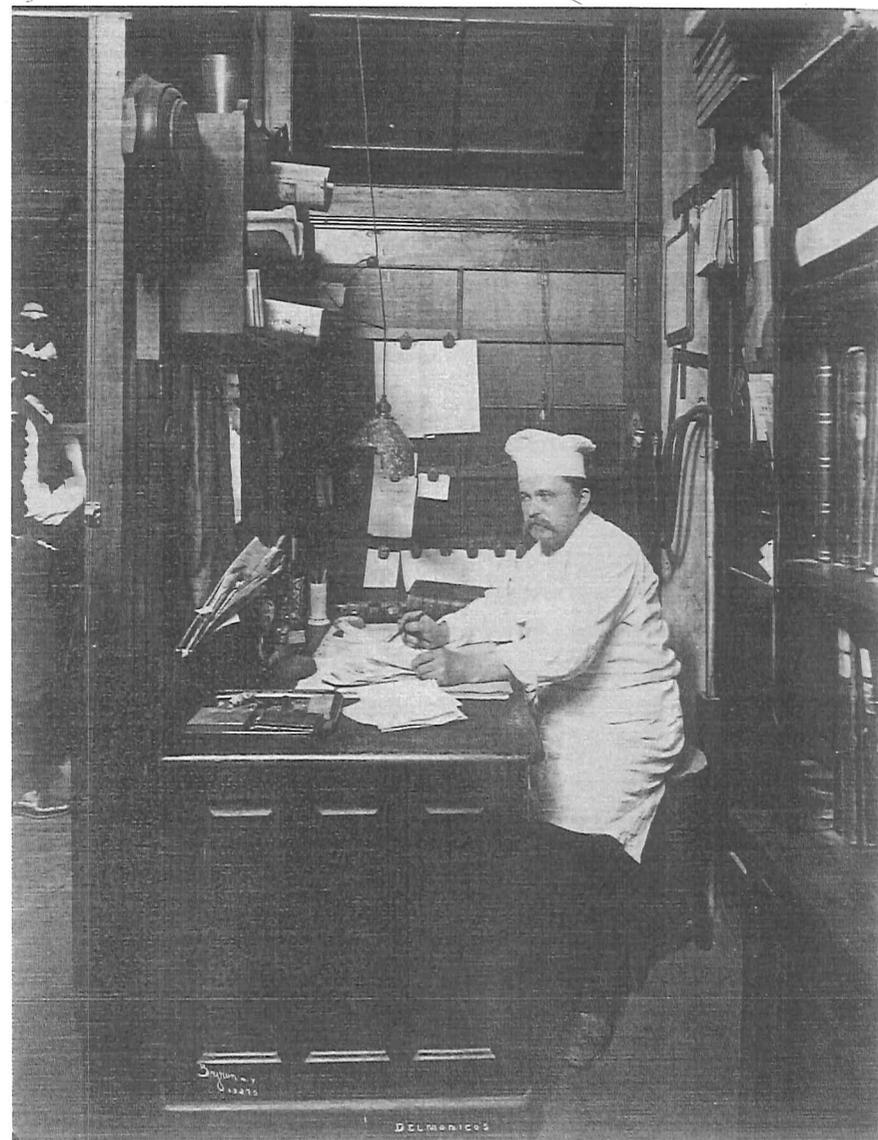


Fig. 8. Chef Charles Ranhofer in 1902.

still a teenager, he became the chef de cuisine for the count of Alsace, senior representative of the distinguished noble family of Hénin-Liétard. He then moved back to Paris to work at a caterer's establishment, and then cooked for two prominent aristocrats of the Second Empire, the Duke of Noailles and the Baron Rothschild. His arrival in New York in 1856 was to take a position in the household of the Russian consul, but he soon moved to Washington, DC, and subsequently New Orleans.³⁵

Ranhofer briefly returned to France in 1860, but was in America again in 1861 to become chef at the Maison Dorée, a magnificent restaurant in New York that had opened in 1860. He didn't last long there either, and finally settled down at Delmonico's in 1862. There was a hiatus from 1876 to 1879, when Ranhofer ran the Hotel Américain at Enghien-les-Bains, a resort in the Paris suburbs, but otherwise he spent the rest of his career in New York at Delmonico's.

Maison Dorée on Union Square had set out to rival Delmonico's, and some regarded it as more authentically Parisian. It only lasted four years, however, and Lorenzo profited from its demise by buying up its wine cellar. The Civil War had undermined Maison Dorée, as did the establishment of Delmonico's Fourteenth Street branch just around the corner the year after Maison Dorée opened. Luxury restaurants abounded in New York by this time, but the Maison Dorée tried deliberately and most obviously to usurp Delmonico's preeminence. Charles Ranhofer may have seen the proverbial writing on the wall, or perhaps he was simply enticed by Lorenzo and the fame of Delmonico's, but whatever the reasons, in 1862 he became the chef at the new Fourteenth Street restaurant.

Ranhofer's *Epicurean* records menus, meals, and dishes offered during his direction of Delmonico's kitchens. The recipes are brief and daunting. No one would mistake this compendium for a user-friendly, step-by-step guide for housewives. As was the case at most fancy restaurants, the Delmonico's cooking staff were exclusively men, and there was a firm division in this era between the male chef as restaurant professional and the

female household cook. Many chefs, such as Ranhofer's colleague at Delmonico's, Alexander Filippini, did write instructional cookbooks for home use, marketed on the basis of the author's professional credentials.³⁶ This should not be taken to imply that cookbooks addressed to housewives were simple or assumed lack of prior knowledge. By current standards, the meals that middle-class women were expected to prepare seem elaborate and sophisticated, involving much more in the way of roasting and baking than is in evidence in today's cookbooks, to say nothing of the necessity of cutting up and preparing poultry, meat, and fish to make them ready for cooking—plastic-wrapped boneless chicken breasts or frozen fish filets were unknown in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, such women, assisted by one or two servants in the kitchen, were not cooking on the level of the grandest restaurant in the country. *The Epicurean* is not so much an aspirational cookbook (on the order of books composed by celebrity chefs today, with lovely illustrations and seemingly impossible recipes), as a professional reference work and an exhaustive career summary.

The book had what the French call a *succès d'estime*—it was acclaimed but did not immediately sell many copies and is now a great rarity. It has nevertheless always had a high reputation among chefs. Ranhofer expected the cook who followed these recipes to have on hand such basics as chicken forcemeat (like stuffing, but with other uses) or sauce Lucullus (an elaborate sauce requiring partridge and truffles) in order to make such dishes as timbales (soft preparations of meat or fish, in this era cooked in a mold). There are thirty timbale recipes in *The Epicurean*, and the timbales are supposed to emerge from their molds in dazzling patterns: for example, “à la Dumas,” with oblong domino-like shapes made from truffle slices and beef tongue; and “harlequin timbales,” which involve a suprême sauce (a white sauce with chicken consommé), a salpicon of artichoke bottoms and quenelle forcemeat decorated with a multicolor lozenge pattern of tongue, truffles, and sauce royale (white sauce of chicken stock, cream, butter, truffles, and sherry).³⁷

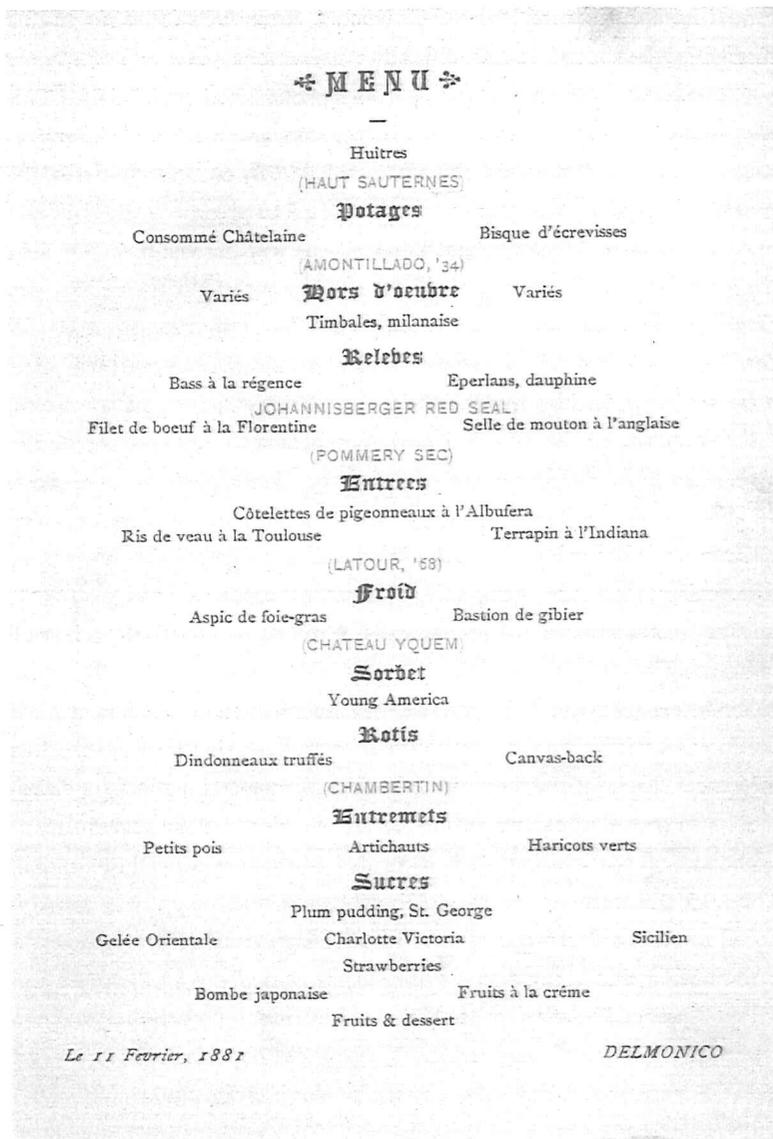


Fig. 9. Delmonico's menu, 1881.

It might now seem perverse, but Ranhofer claimed to have simplified the recipes, but his audience would have been chefs rather than home cooks. He gave extended information on matters such as selecting, cutting up, and cooking terrapin—instructions unlikely to be of use for amateurs. He lists tables of price, proportions of wastage versus useful meat depending on turtle size, and other data needed to calculate the best way of buying and serving this expensive treat. The basic terrapin cooking instructions seem to require techniques drawn from surgery and the construction trades. There follow ten recipes for classics such as Terrapin à la Maryland—cut-up terrapin cooked in butter and Madeira to which cream and mashed hard-boiled eggs-yolks were added—but there is also an unusual combination of terrapin cutlets and croquettes in a cream sauce.³⁸

Ranhofer includes a table of produce and their seasons, illustrations of sculpted-sugar desserts (*pièces montées*), and describes forms of table service. Notwithstanding the elaborate courses and dishes at Delmonico's, Ranhofer accommodated the American desire for speed. He expected a fourteen-course meal to be served in a mere two hours and twenty minutes (ten minutes per course) but was happy, upon request, to accelerate the pace to eight minutes per course so that the meal might conclude in less than two hours.

Fourteen courses! We know how they were made not only from Ranhofer's cookbook but also from descriptions of his efficient kitchen. An article in the *Sun* describes Ranhofer supervising forty cooks, "perfectly trained and drilled as a regiment of soldiers" from his office in the middle of the kitchen.³⁹ But who could have eaten such meals routinely? Even ordinary, everyday menus of the period assume separate services of soup, fish, boiled meat, cold platters, roast meat, a choice among several entrées (delicate and complicated dishes with sauces), vegetable accompaniments, and perhaps a spot of game such as wild duck just before the dessert to renew the appetite. To be sure, there were different concepts of body image then

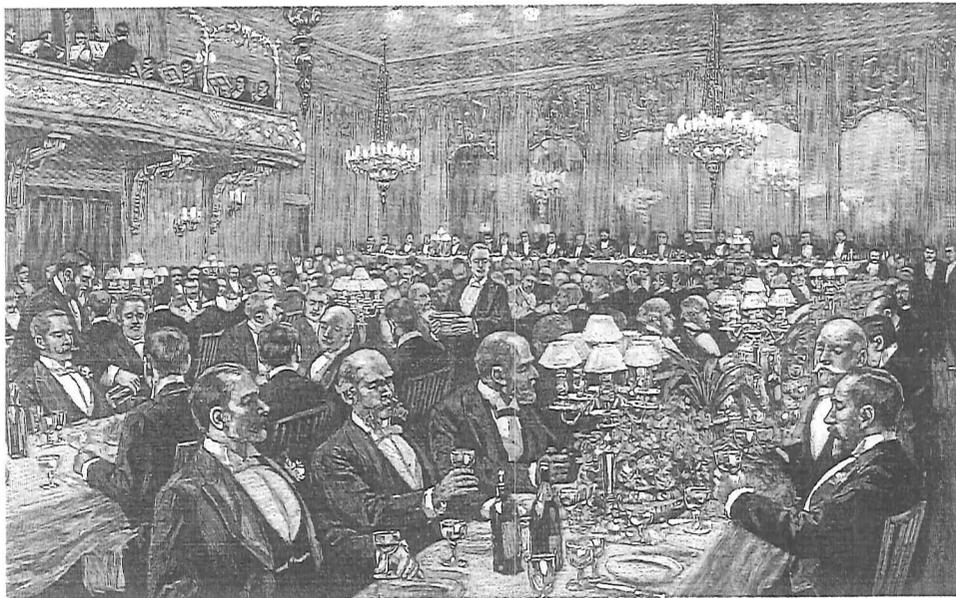


Fig. 10. Dinner given at Delmonico's by the New York Chamber of Commerce, 1890.

and now. Thinness signaled ill humor and bad digestion; women were expected to be plump, ideally of Rubenesque proportions, while men were given considerable license for girth. Nevertheless, gross obesity was not approved of. The people who enjoyed these meals seem in retrospect to have been either unusually fortunate or uniquely ravenous. Unless they possessed extraordinarily rapid and strong digestion or routinely indulged in extreme sports, it's hard to come up with a convincing explanation for how such quantities of rich food were put away.

A premium was placed on ostentation and excess. It was expected that at an elegant meal too much would be served; Delmonico's did not offer doggie bags. Perhaps one could take small bites of a number of dishes, or ignore the plethora of what was set out in favor of a few selections, but there is no indication that restraint was normal practice. Wasteful

as these meals must have been, they show a degree of enchantment and enjoyment that should challenge common assumptions that our current age is unique in its food obsession, or that we eat far better than people did in the past.

The Epicurean includes a complete repertoire of grand French cuisine, although almost nothing of the provincial or bourgeois traditions that were becoming popular in France at the same time—for example Occitan cassoulet or Burgundian coq au vin. Ranhofer also has an extensive selection of American food, and not just the high-end game and fish such as the aforementioned canvasback ducks or shad. One hundred and sixteen sumptuous breakfast menus go well beyond the skimpy “continental breakfast” of bread, butter, and jam to include American corned-beef hash, pancakes, Saratoga potatoes, and cream pies. Elsewhere we can find instructions for making pumpkin pie, succotash, curried oysters, and clam chowder.

There is a recipe for a cream of corn soup “à la Mendocino” that would have a curious afterlife at Chez Panisse in the 1970s, where its rediscovery by Chef Jeremiah Tower would be regarded as the beginning of the new American regional cuisine.⁴⁰ Whatever its later importance (and as we'll see, its importance is exaggerated), the Mendocino soup is one of a handful of American regional dishes presented by Ranhofer. How he ever heard of the remote Northern California county of Mendocino is unknown. He expresses appreciation for the bounty of American farms and landscape, but for all his time in New Orleans, Ranhofer offers little in the way of Creole cuisine (two gumbo recipes), while New England and the South are completely neglected.

Rather surprisingly, Ranhofer has a recipe for Chinese bird's nest soup, but although the cookbook was published at a time of increasing American curiosity about the food of immigrants, Ranhofer was not interested in anything approaching a global food culture. This is in contrast to the other Delmonico's veteran, Filippini, who described meals from Hong

Kong, Korea, Japan, and Hawaii, and provided an early recipe for chop suey, defined here as “bits of pork.”⁴¹

By contrast, *The Epicurean* reflects the elaborate, complicated, heavily garnished French grande cuisine of the nineteenth century. Butter, truffles, cream, and an intimidating variety of rich sauces were the basis of a cooking style with more game and mutton than we are familiar with; perhaps a bit less beef; many more fish species; and softer, thicker food—quite the opposite of our current preference for lightly grilled meat, *al dente* pasta, and crisp, lightly cooked vegetables. Meat and fish were served with elaborate garnishes, and not just any frippery but according to a French code of what “edible decorations” belonged with what dishes. The 1961 *Larousse Gastronomique* lists about 200 “simple” garnishes and 150 “composite” garnishes involving quenelles, truffles, shaped vegetables, mushrooms, potato nests, and all manner of delightful, difficult, and now-forgotten ornaments.

More than a mere imitator of Parisian culinary fashions, Ranhofer was inventive. Lobster Newberg first appeared under his command, and if he wasn't the first to develop the method of preparing ice cream in a hot meringue surrounding, he did give the name “Baked Alaska” to this confection in honor of Secretary of State Seward's extravagant purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867.⁴²

With 3,700 recipes, 500 suggested bills of fare, and 85 complete banquet menus, it would seem as if *The Epicurean* had revealed to all and sundry Delmonico's proprietary information. The retired Delmonico's manager Leopold Rimmer said that Ranhofer “gave away all the secrets of the house” to every “Tom, Dick and Harry who calls himself a chief cook” and blamed him for causing a decline in the restaurant's business.⁴³ Yet the book's front matter includes a handwritten note of endorsement from young Charles Delmonico, which seemed a pretty clear indicator it was not perceived as undermining the restaurant but rather as assuring the perpetuation of its fame.

A LESS FAVORABLE ERA

Despite Leopold Rimmer's complaints, Ranhofer's cookbook did not adversely affect Delmonico's—perhaps because its recipes were so hard to duplicate even for well-equipped kitchens, or perhaps because those recipes were already rather old-fashioned by 1893. There were some more turbulent waters to be navigated in the closing decades of the nineteenth and opening of the twentieth century, but at first these were mere ripples in the changing fashionable surface. In 1881, the year of Lorenzo Delmonico's death, Louis Sherry, the son of a carpenter from Vermont, opened a confectionery and catering establishment. The enterprise flourished as Sherry received contracts for galas at the Metropolitan Opera beginning in 1883 and in 1885 devised delicate Japanese décor for parties during the wildly successful run of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado*. Sherry opened a restaurant, Sherry's, in 1889 on Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Seventh Street, farther uptown than Delmonico's had yet ventured.

Sherry's was a more successful and enduring rival to Delmonico's than the Maison Dorée had been thirty years earlier. It offered distinguished, more-or-less French food in a splendid atmosphere designed to evoke the palace at Versailles. In 1891, a reporter for the *Herald* complained about waiting around at Delmonico's because Young Charley wouldn't accept reservations for anytime after six thirty. The writer lamented that with all its irritating inconveniences, Delmonico's was still preeminent—“You can say what you please, that other places are as good; they may be. Delmonico's is by no means superlatively excellent these days. But people won't go to other places.” This was not quite true, for as another *Herald* writer noted, there were other options. For the season of balls, the young flocked to Sherry's while the “wall flowers, old timers and patricians” clung to Delmonico's.⁴⁴

Sherry's was flashier than Delmonico's and accommodated itself to the increasingly showy tastes of a new wave of parvenus. In December 1896,

Sherry's was raided by the police, who had received a tip about a bachelor party for a flamboyant character named Herbert Barnum Seeley, nephew of circus impresario P. T. Barnum, at which the dancer known as "Little Egypt" was preparing to perform in the nude.⁴⁵ If anything, Sherry's profited from the scandal, which increased its reputation for providing an amusing rather than stuffy atmosphere.

In Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie*, which itself created a scandal when it appeared in 1900, the young, ambitious protagonist has heard from newspapers about Sherry's, "the luxuriousness and gorgeousness of this temple of gastronomy." As with Henry James observing Verena's love for Delmonico's, the Hoosier-born Dreiser rather more acidulously disapproved of the ostentation, waste, and cost of a meal at a New York luxury restaurant. His heroine is still a working-class girl at this point, and so it is more likely she would be taken to Sherry's than to Delmonico's.

Another rival to Delmonico's was the Waldorf Hotel, opened on Park Avenue in 1893 and soon merged with the adjoining Astoria. The restaurant at the Waldorf was under the direction of Oscar Tschirky, a Swiss immigrant who had worked at Delmonico's as a waiter and then manager of private rooms and catering. Tschirky had a knack for providing a splashier kind of publicity than that afforded by Delmonico's. For wealthy people who did not figure in Ward McAllister's 400, publicity was not something to be avoided. The velvet rope, still today a mark of distinction and discrimination, was designed by Tschirky to allow ordinary people to congregate in the hotel lobby to gape at A-list arrivals while clearing a path for these luminaries.

In the waning years of the nineteenth century, as the Gilded Age was transformed without losing any of its vulgarity, the Bradley Martin Ball of February 1897 at the Waldorf was a well-publicized riot of excess. Not that it differed so much from the run of common showing off, but it did have roses, clematis, "flirtation bowers," myriad orchids, and a virtual forest landscaping the ballroom and adjacent corridors. The 700 bejeweled

guests were dressed in historical costumes. Their hostess, Cornelia (Mrs. Bradley) Martin, wore \$50,000 worth of jewelry adorning her Elizabethan-period outfit. We don't hear much about the food, but the event galvanized resentment against the turn-of-the-century plutocracy and the Martins shortly thereafter felt it prudent to leave for Europe permanently.⁴⁶ Here again, the venue in which the affair was held did not bear any opprobrium; Tschirky had demonstrated his ability to host an event no matter what the scale or expense. He would rule for forty years at the Waldorf.

As the twentieth century approached, Delmonico's was no longer alone at the summit of American gastronomy, but its glittering reputation was untarnished. A glowing portrait of the restaurant and its food in 1896 is provided in *The Alienist* (written in 1994), Caleb Carr's historical novel of suspense and abnormal psychology. The team trying to figure out the identity of a serial killer has dinner in a private room at Delmonico's. They are greeted by Young Charley Delmonico, described as "suave, dapper and eternally tactful." The party of five dines on oysters, green-turtle soup, bass with Mornay sauce, saddle of lamb Colbert, Maryland terrapin, canvasback duck with hominy and currant jelly, foie gras in aspic, fried pears marinated in wine with apricot sauce, and petits fours. A "sorbet Elsinore" midway during the meal is a refreshing interval. Two kinds of sherry, a Riesling (Hochheimer), a red Bordeaux (Chateau Lagrange), and a red Burgundy (Chambertin) accompany the meal. In setting the scene of this chapter, the author depicts the still-magical reputation of Delmonico's for extraordinary food, elegance, and its apparent openness and lack of exacting social discrimination.⁴⁷

In 1897, Young Charley established what was to be the last Delmonico's, on Forty-Fourth Street and Fifth Avenue, close to Times Square, the newest location of the city's migratory entertainment center. Smoking was for the first time permitted in the public rooms and an orchestra played, although it was discreet. Complaints about the relatively cramped and awkward space at Forty-Fourth Street became louder when the beloved

but now not very busy Madison Square Delmonico's closed in 1899. That left but two Delmonico's, the new branch and the old Citadel.

A novel challenge to Delmonico's came from restaurants designed for entertainment. While Sherry's or the Waldorf allowed guests to create their own festivities, their public restaurants were conventionally restrained in manner, heavily decorated in Louis XV or XVI style, and somnolent. For a fancy restaurant to be fun in itself was new. Rector's, a restaurant that originated in Chicago, became the proverbial talk of the town when it opened in Times Square in 1899.⁴⁸ Rector's was the most famous of what were known as "lobster palaces"—venues with large rooms and luxurious but garish décor, where Champagne flowed freely and every meal was a loud celebration. An orchestra accompanied the diners, playing excerpts from Offenbach operettas and other light music, and dancing for patrons was added in 1910. The restaurant was ornate in a style of traditional excess, but it also featured the first revolving-door entrance.

Rector's was an ideal place for men with money to entertain chorus girls (*chorines* as they were known) without fear of making an inappropriate social statement. According to George Rector himself, the restaurant was "the supreme court of triviality" and "the cathedral of froth." A hit from the 1913 Ziegfeld Follies was "If a Table at Rector's Could Talk" and people lined up on Broadway to see a musical farce entitled *The Girl from Rector's*.

The concepts of "froth" and "triviality" generally meant fun in an opulent and socially indiscriminating setting. "Frivolity" or "lack of seriousness" in this context meant a chance for men to indulge in sexual license of a sort that was less obviously sordid than consorting with prostitutes but hardly to be confused with respectable courtship. Chorines or dancers at the Follies were talented entertainers and amusing if not socially presentable. New York was now full of young, unattached women of unconventional temperament who might eventually settle down with a middle-class husband but who meanwhile took part, like Sister Carrie, in the night-



Fig. 11. Menu cover from Rector's, 1917.

life of the city. William Glackens's painting *Chez Mouquin* (1905) shows a middle-aged man dining with a young woman at Mouquin's, a French restaurant on Sixth Avenue and Twenty-Eighth Street. The gentleman was readily identifiable to contemporaries as James B. Moore, a well-known



Fig. 12. William Glackens, *Chez Mouquin*, 1905.



Fig. 13. The main dining room at Rector's, ca. 1920.

man about town. Although the picture was extensively noticed, his anonymous, beautifully dressed, slightly bored companion was not of such low or obviously “professional” status as to cause a scandal. Mouquin's, one of several rivals to Rector's, aspired to haute cuisine, but, as one regular patron recalled, “one entered Mouquin's to shed all forms of seriousness.”⁴⁹

Given the fervid atmosphere, the food at Rector's seems to have been surprisingly good and the menus were large and varied, offering considerably more than just lobsters. A menu from May 1900 lists 378 dishes. You could eat canvasback ducks, redhead ducks, partridges, or terrapin (the most expensive items on a 1904 menu). Although there was lots of foie gras, the food was not meticulously French. Many dishes were on the order of “lamb kidneys, sautés échalottes” (sautéed with shallots)—not really more French than the deviled lamb kidneys, salmon sauce verte, or oyster cocktail.⁵⁰

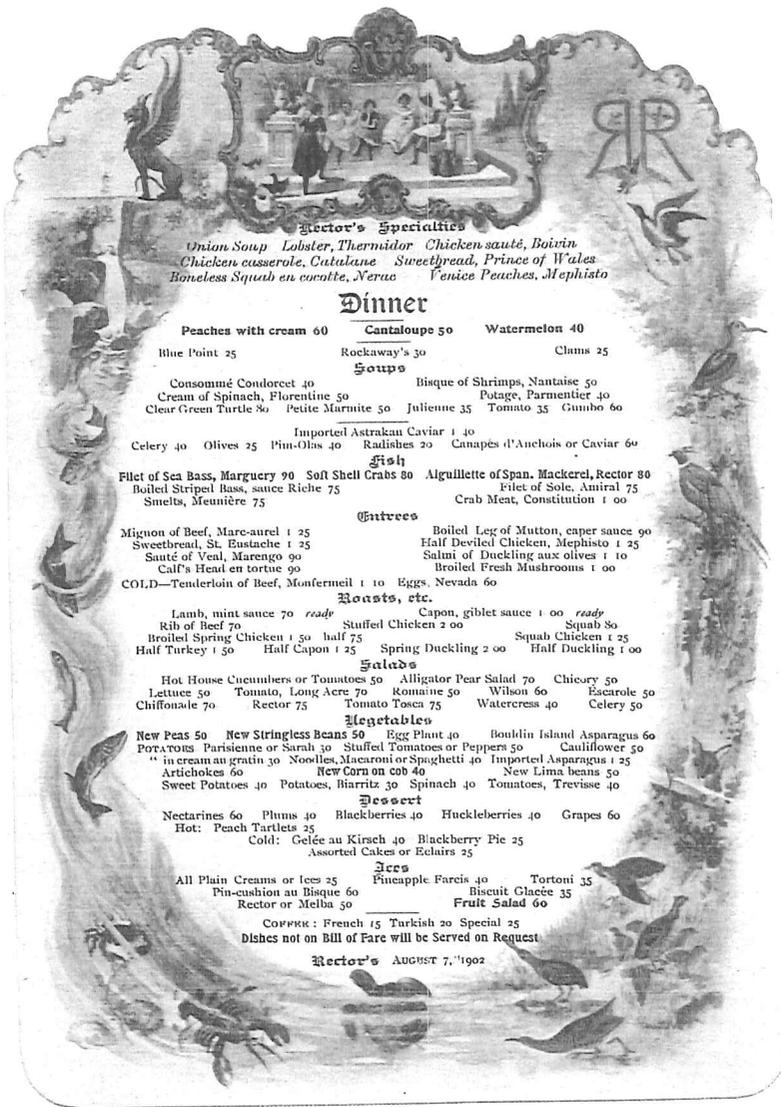


Fig. 14. Rector's menu, 1902.

By 1900, Delmonico's, its atmosphere still more "serious" and soigné than the likes of Rector's, had given in to changing times by offering food that was less French and more American than had been the case in its grandest years. A 1900 menu from the Citadel lists French items such as Vol-au-Vent Financière (pastry shells with a rich, complex sauce of which truffles was only one ingredient), beef tournedos (beef with foie gras), and sweetbreads, but the ensemble of dishes is comparatively plain—roast turkey, mushrooms on toast, glazed ham, pigeon with peas. American specialties are featured, not just the de rigueur canvasbacks and terrapin but shad roe, pompano from the Gulf of Mexico, and local bluefish.⁵¹

More dangerous than competition from the likes of Rector's or Sherry's was the manifestation of long-term problems in Delmonico's management and finances. After sixteen years in charge, "Young Charley" died of tuberculosis in 1901 at the age of forty-one. He was succeeded by his mother, Rosa Delmonico, affectionately known as "Aunt Rosa," who died soon afterward, in 1904, leaving the restaurant to her niece, Josephine Crist Delmonico Otard, and Josephine's brother, Lorenzo Crist Delmonico.

Day-to-day management was in the hands of Eugène Garnier, who had been employed at Delmonico's for more than thirty years. Garnier was a fine host but a poor manager, and it became obvious that the restaurants, although busy and popular, were losing money. In 1906–1907, legal proceedings were launched by Lorenzo Delmonico and Albert Thieriot, an executor of the will of Rosa Delmonico, to take over and exclude Josephine, who was allied with Garnier. The restaurant was shown to be losing money as a result of multiple mortgages and various other forms of borrowing, as well as mismanagement, thus Lorenzo and Thieriot asked to have it placed in receivership. Ultimately this effort was unsuccessful, but new management was agreed upon and this move salvaged the restaurant's financial position for the time being. The public airing of Delmonico's divisions and financial fragility did not help its fortunes. Long-term

Nies mourned the death of Delmonico's at the hands of Prohibition and the triumph of mediocrity in its place:

No more the grape with fire divine
Shall light the torch of pleasure gay,
And where the gourmand paused to dine
Hot dog and fudge shops have their day.⁵⁴

The mystique of Delmonico's has nevertheless survived the ninety-five years since the closing of the original business. In 1927 a restaurateur named Oscar Tucci reopened the Citadel and the establishment was popularly known as "Oscar's Delmonico." It restored much of the glamor of Delmonico's past. Delmonico's was famous for its steaks and attracted political and entertainment notables on the order of Richard Nixon, Frank Sinatra, and Elizabeth Taylor. It lasted until 1987. Another family ran it as "Delmonico's Restaurant" until 1992. An Italian business, the Bicke Group, bought the vacant premises in 1998 and restored the restaurant to something resembling its late-nineteenth century look. Bicke then sold it to a partnership led by Milan Licul and Branko Turcinovic who have made an ambitious effort to recapture the luster of America's first grand restaurant.

LEGACY AND INFLUENCE

Delmonico's unequivocally established an American standard for elegance and refinement and inspired many imitators. Restaurants in New Orleans and San Francisco called themselves "Delmonico's" without authorization (the New Orleans establishment, founded in 1895, is now run by Emeril Lagasse); a New York Chinese restaurant called Mon Lay Won referred to itself as "the Chinese Delmonico."⁵⁵ In 1863, a North Carolina writer described an African American-owned boardinghouse as "the Delmoni-

co's of New Bern."⁵⁶ Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, a classic novel of the Old West, mockingly describes a place in Omaha claiming to serve "Frogs Legs à la Delmonico's."⁵⁷ Even comical imitations were tributes to Delmonico's preeminence.

In its long era of distinction, Delmonico's inspired the American luxury restaurant. We have seen that Delmonico's was never so purely

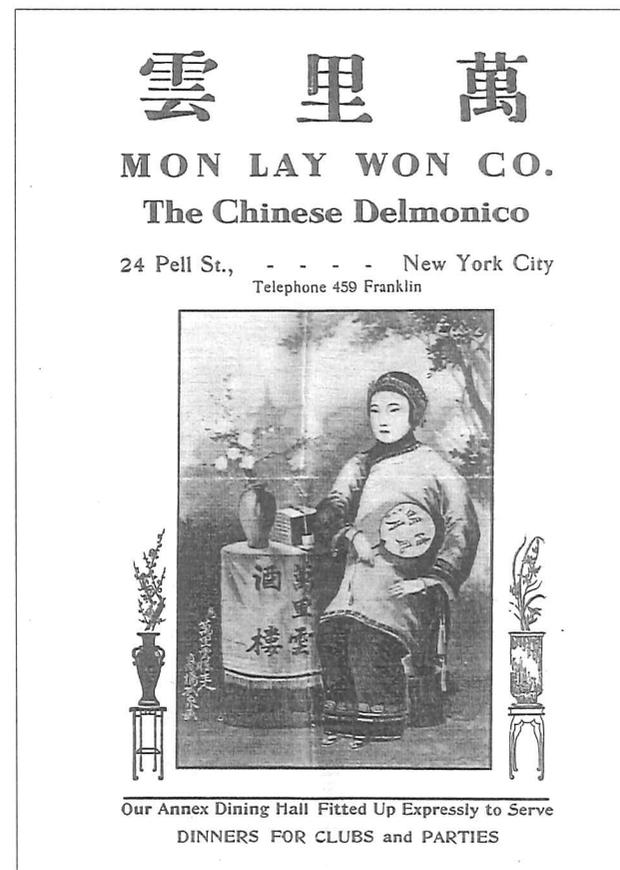


Fig. 16. Menu cover from Mon Lay Won, "the Chinese Delmonico," ca. 1910.

French that it did not offer distinctly American dishes such as terrapin or shad. Looking at other celebrated restaurants of the nineteenth century shows that while their menus were often written in French and they had a number of French-inspired dishes such as Chicken à la Marengo, or fricandeau of veal or fish with Hollandaise sauce, they tended to favor a vaguely international style rather than strictly French cuisine. A particularly hard-to-explain phenomenon is a passion for baked macaroni, a seeming anomaly, since no other Italian dishes were popular at fancy restaurants until well into the twentieth century. At the elegant Revere House Hotel in Boston, a series of 706 daily menus between 1862 and 1865 shows that the most popular entrées were, in descending order:

Macaroni au gratin
Escalloped oysters
Oysters baked in their shells
Oyster patties
Chicken fricassee
Macaroni and cheese [similar to, if not the same as, Macaroni au gratin]
Salmis of duck
Baked macaroni
Macaroni au Parmesan
Beef à la mode
Baked beans with pork
*Apple fritters*⁵⁸

Beef à la mode (larded and braised beef), chicken fricassee, and the salmis of duck are more-or-less French. Although obviously Italian in origin, macaroni made in a rich, soupy sauce was also popular in nineteenth-century Paris. Nevertheless, the overall impression is that even at the Revere House, considered a gastronomic temple, the most popular dishes were thrifty rather than magnificent.

A survey of eighty-four other US restaurant menus from between 1840 and 1865, comprising about 1,000 entrées, gives similar results for the most popular entrées:

Macaroni au gratin
Chicken fricassee
Baked beans and pork
Macaroni à l'Italienne
Oyster patties
Escalloped oysters
Apple fritters
Beef à la mode
Salmis of duck with olives
Currie of lobster [sic]
Oysters baked in shell
*Fillet of beef with mushrooms*⁵⁹

Even before the advent of Sherry's and others of its type, there were some more impressive rivals to Delmonico's than this prosaic list might lead one to believe. The first grand hotel in the United States, Tremont House in Boston, opened in 1829 and although no menus survive from its earliest days, an 1844 menu in French includes sweetbreads in sorrel sauce, jellied venison with currant sauce, larded beef filets with Champagne sauce, and other dishes from the French repertoire.⁶⁰ As we will see in the next chapter, Antoine's in New Orleans began in 1840 with a French-trained chef as owner and in a city with a particular but, in its fashion, authoritative, take on French cuisine.

In 1851 there was even a contest between Delmonico's and a restaurant in Philadelphia with the retrospectively unfortunate name "Parkinson's" and, contrary to all expectations, Delmonico's lost. We only know what was served by James Parkinson, the victor, who presented a meal

in seventeen courses lasting from six p.m. until the blush of dawn twelve hours later. Even at Parkinson's, however, the food was only inconsistently French: sweetbreads with tomato sauce; mutton cutlets, chicken croquettes, Vol-au-Vent à la Financière. What was impressive was the ability to transport food from far away (reed birds from South Carolina; salmon from the Kennebec River in Maine), an unusual sorbet made from very old Tokay, and the sheer number of courses including terrapin (of course) and wild game birds.⁶¹

Most striking about Delmonico's and its imitators is how unfamiliar the food seems to us today. The French dishes represent a vanished grande cuisine based on sauces, truffles, elaborate garnishes, and a veritable stampede of game. Salmis and timbales have not disappeared in France but are not at the center of attention anymore. The American dishes are, for the most part, equally strange, either because they are based on now-endangered species (terrapin, game birds), or items we don't seem to like anymore—organ meat, timbales, pig's feet, mutton, calf's head, fritters, croquettes.

Looking at ten specific restaurants, we are trying to fathom the mystery of what American cuisine really is. With Delmonico's, arguably the most famous restaurant in American history, we are at an early stage of the investigation into what makes American cuisine, but already we can see how mysterious and unfamiliar the process of finding an answer can be.

ANTOINE'S¹ HAUTE CREOLE



While not quite the oldest restaurant in the United States, a distinction enjoyed by Boston's Union Oyster House founded in 1826, Antoine's is by far the oldest grand restaurant in continuous existence. Over its long history, the restaurant has been run by a single family, descendants of founder Antoine Alciatore. Established in 1840 in the French Quarter of New Orleans, close to its present location on St. Louis Street, Antoine's exemplifies the magnificent but endangered regional culinary heritage of America. It has described itself as a French restaurant for almost all of its history, but has actually created dozens of original dishes and made use of the unique ingredients and cooking style of New Orleans.

With fifteen dining rooms, Antoine's size is surpassed in our list of ten restaurants only by that of Mamma Leone's and the Rockefeller Center branch of Schrafft's. Its décor and culinary style are historically evocative, and the restaurant occupies a conspicuous and striking four-story edifice, the oldest part built in 1790. Thin columns support an ornate wrought-iron fronted balcony in what we think of as typical French Louisiana style,

accomplish what Italian establishments achieved in moving from a low- to high-end image. The twenty-first-century wealth of China has meant that a talented chef can find more lucrative and satisfying employment *outside* the United States. The widespread belief that American Chinese restaurants cannot aspire to much distinction may be because we take Chinese restaurants so much for granted that they seem invisible when so many other sorts of cuisines are being introduced and popularized. Perhaps this is about to change: the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, recently bought by a Chinese company, opened an elegant restaurant in 2015 called La Chine, featuring the food of Zhejiang Province. New regional Chinese restaurants are opening in Pittsburgh to serve a large and eager clientele of Chinese university, business, and medical students and professionals. A recent article in *Saveur* describes the preparation of soup dumplings, eight-treasures duck from Chengdu, and cumin-scented dishes from Xian.⁵¹

The trajectory of America's love affair with Chinese food has not been consistently upward, but one can hardly fault the joyful and redoubtable Cecilia Chiang for this. In 2012, friends told her she had to "rescue" Chinese food and reopen the sort of restaurant that the Mandarin had once been, so that she might show the way toward appreciating the culinary richness and variety of China. Her response was that, at ninety-three, she was too old, although if she were merely eighty-three, that would be a different story.⁵²

SYLVIA'S¹

THE SOUL OF HARLEM



In August 1962, Sylvia Woods opened her restaurant in New York's Harlem on Lenox Avenue (now also named Malcolm X Boulevard) just north of 126th Street. Fifty years later, her death in 2012 at the age of eighty-six marked the end of her tenure as one of the most venerated restaurateurs in America. For Ms. Woods, these were fifty years of struggle, followed by success, expansion, and eventually fame. Her eponymous restaurant's upward trajectory defied a long decline that seemed to characterize Harlem in the decades after the riots in the summer of 1964.

For most of the late twentieth century, Harlem experienced housing decay and abandonment. The neighborhood was victimized by bank redlining, neglect from an often-indifferent city government, and urban erosion brought about by drugs, violence, and endemic unemployment. Sylvia's was a counterexample to the experience of many businesses in the neighborhood, managing not only to survive but to flourish in the 1970s and 1980s—painful albeit retrospectively picturesque years in the history of New York. As with the Mandarin, Sylvia's owed much of its success to

534-9414 328 Lenox Avenue

FOOD FOR THE SOUL

Thursday

Turkey Wings and Dressing.....	4.25
Short Rib of Beef.....	4.50
Bar-B-Q Ribs.....	4.50
Fried or Smothered Chicken.....	4.25
Fried or Smothered Chops.....	4.50
Baked Ham.....	4.25
Hot Sausage.....	3.00

Friday

Fried Fish.....	4.25
Short Rib of Beef.....	4.50
Fried or Smothered Chicken.....	4.25
Fried or Smothered Chops.....	4.50
Baked Ham.....	4.25
Hot Sausage.....	3.00

Saturday

Bar-B-Q Ribs.....	4.50
Short Rib of Beef.....	4.50
Beef Liver.....	4.00
Fried or Smothered Chicken.....	4.25
Fried or Smothered Chops.....	4.50
Baked Ham.....	4.25
Hot Sausage.....	3.00

All Outgoing Orders.....30¢ Extra

Vegetables

Rice
Greens
Blackeyes or Limas
Potato Salad
Macaroni and Cheese
Candied Sweets
String Beans

Vegetables

String Beans
Rice
Blackeyes or Limas
Potato Salad
Greens
Candied Sweets
Macaroni and Cheese
Pickel Beets

Vegetables

String Beans
Rice
Blackeyes or Limas
Potato Salad
Greens
Candied Sweets
Macaroni and Cheese
Pickel Beets

the vivacious personality of its owner. Under her guidance, Sylvia's became a meeting place for political, religious, and community leaders. While retaining that neighborhood focus, Sylvia's also profited from the curiosity of European and Japanese tourists about black America, and beginning in the 1980s lunch at Sylvia's became a required stop on any cultural tour of Harlem.

Most of all, the restaurant's reputation built on a tradition of African American cuisine, a rural, Southern, "down-home" style marketed to a Northern clientele as "soul food." Sylvia Woods adopted the sobriquet "The Queen of Soul Food," and her signature dishes included African American culinary classics such as fried chicken, barbecued spareribs, cornbread, and collard greens. In the late 1960s, "soul food" generally replaced "Southern," "down home," or "country" as the preferred nomenclature for describing the prevailing styles of African American cuisine brought up from the South early in the twentieth century during what is commonly referred to as the Great Migration, when African Americans moved from the South to the cities of the North and Midwest. The gastronomic terms are not mutually exclusive, however. In a 1986 interview, Sylvia Woods, the Queen of Soul Food herself, referred to her cooking as "down-home and family style."²

I have chosen to feature Sylvia's here because its story reveals the cultural implications of the movement of black people from the South to the North in the first part of the twentieth century. Beginning before the First World War, black migrants, attracted by economic opportunity and the freer (if hardly egalitarian) North, transformed the spaces and places where they settled and worked. The routes of the railroad lines influenced patterns of settlement so that migrants from Virginia, the Carolinas, Florida, and Georgia relocated to New York, while those from Louisiana and Mississippi tended to favor Chicago. An indicator of this historical shift is the rise in the black population of New York from 91,709 in 1910 to 327,706 in 1930. In 1930, less than one-quarter of the city's black population had been

Fig. 71. Sylvia's menu, daily specials.

born in New York State. About the same number were foreign-born. One-half came from the South. These figures show the influence of the Southern exodus, and also the less-appreciated presence in Harlem of people from the West Indies and Africa.³

African American New Yorkers had long been concentrated in Greenwich Village, but after about 1850 they moved to what was called the Tenderloin, in southern midtown Manhattan. Only around 1900 did Harlem start to be settled by black New Yorkers moving from other neighborhoods. By the time the Southern exodus kicked into high gear around 1910, Harlem was becoming the center of African American life in New York City.

A QUEEN IS BORN

Sylvia Woods's life exemplifies the importance of family ties and enduring cultural contacts between the South and the North. Born Sylvia Pressley in 1926 in the small town of Hemingway, South Carolina, she came from a family of farmers, laundresses, and laborers.⁴ Her father, Van Pressley, died just days after her birth, a delayed casualty of gas attacks he suffered during the First World War. As a child, Sylvia once asked her mother why she didn't get a husband to help with work on the farm. Julia Pressley received a monthly government check after her husband's service-related death, payment that would cease if she married again. Showing her daughter the veteran's compensation check, Mrs. Pressley said, "Sylvia, this is my husband."⁵

The family hardly escaped the pernicious consequences of a rigidly segregated and unequal society. In 1906, Sylvia's maternal grandfather was hanged in South Carolina for a murder he did not commit in what amounted to a police-initiated lynching. Her grandmother, a midwife, did not know how to read or write, but managed to buy a farm. Despite the

poverty and racial oppression of her childhood, Sylvia Woods remembered Hemingway as a close-knit, peaceful, and mutually supportive community. Her family was entrepreneurial, loyal, and confident that their abilities and labor would reap rewards.

Sylvia Pressley grew up without electricity or running water; almost everything the family ate was from their farm, and they used a mule to plow and to bring back wood from the forest. In her recollections she celebrates the food of her childhood: on Sundays, chicken (fried, roasted, or smothered), ham, pork roast, or beef stew; on Labor Day (the end of the corn, tobacco, and cotton harvests), barbecued venison and raccoon, okra, butter beans, and collard greens; for routine breakfasts, biscuits and syrup, grits, okra, tomatoes, and fried fish; and on normal days, a round of vegetables, baked ham, barbecued ribs, macaroni baked with cheese, and perloo, the Low Country rice specialty made with meat, shrimp, sausage, or vegetables.

When Sylvia was three, her mother moved, temporarily, to New York to take a job as a laundress. After five years she returned to South Carolina, but the attraction of the North—its gritty, cacophonous vibrancy—continued to draw the family in that direction. During the Second World War, Sylvia Pressley went to New York to attend beauty school, and returned home to open a hairdressing parlor. In 1944 she married her childhood sweetheart, Herbert Deward Woods, when he was on a brief leave from the navy. They moved to New York after the war ended, but Herbert Woods reenlisted. In the military, which tended to put many black soldiers into forms of domestic work, he learned baking. He would later bring this skill to the restaurant.

Over the years there was a constant back-and-forth between South Carolina and New York. Sylvia and Herbert's three children were sent to live in Hemingway in 1953. Reflecting on this frequent travel, Sylvia wrote that Hemingway seemed to her a suburb of New York, while New York looked like a big city just down the road from the tiny town.⁶ In 1954, the year the

Supreme Court issued its historic *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation decision, Sylvia Woods quit a job in a factory located inconveniently far away in Brooklyn and started waiting tables at Johnson's Luncheonette, a Harlem restaurant with a counter and just a few booths with tables. She knew a lot about cooking, but not restaurant work. As her memoir makes clear, food in the African American South, and for that matter, the South generally, was associated with homes, families, and communities, not something perfected in restaurants. The only restaurant in Hemingway did not even serve black people; before she started work at Johnson's, Woods had almost never been inside a restaurant.⁷ Nevertheless, she was determined to get the job. Mr. Johnson asked her if she had any experience and she replied energetically in the affirmative. He told her, "Get me a cup of coffee," and, unfamiliar with the spigot, she burned herself on the coffee that flowed too fast from it. Despite the mistake, Johnson decided Sylvia Woods was a dedicated and certainly self-confident worker and hired her anyway.⁸

In 1962, at Mr. Johnson's suggestion, Woods bought the luncheonette from him for \$20,000, mortgaging the family farm in Hemingway to pay for it. She waited for a year until she had paid off her grandmother, who actually had the title to the farm, and then changed the name of the establishment to Sylvia's. It did not seem different from any of the other small, struggling restaurants in the neighborhood, but it soon became more than merely a place to grab a meal. Sylvia Woods was good at establishing an atmosphere where people felt like talking and lingering, so along with the good food, its attraction was as a place to meet up and be seen. Its food was excellent and evocative. With its six booths and fifteen barstools at a counter, Sylvia's served food that was familiar to folks from the rural South, food that was hard to obtain or cook in the city.

In the Johnson years and in the beginning of Sylvia Woods's ownership, the restaurant was best known for breakfast. It developed a group of regulars, whom Sylvia Woods and her family called by their occupa-

tions: "Coca-Cola man," or "Con-Ed man," in the latter case a reference to the local utility, Consolidated Edison.⁹ A breakfast menu from the 1980s includes eggs, sausage, salmon cakes, bacon, pork chops, beef liver, chicken, and sardines—all of which could be ordered with grits. Hotcakes round out this menu. The same document shows dinner specials during the week. Some items, such as beef short ribs, fried or smothered chicken, and baked ham, were available most days. Others, such as chicken giblets, oxtails or fried fish, were offered only one day of the week. There was always a wide choice of vegetables, including pickled beets, greens, and candied sweet potatoes, but also standard Southern "vegetable" side dishes such as potato salad and macaroni and cheese.¹⁰

The menu hasn't changed dramatically in the intervening thirty years or so. New items include a "sassy Angus burger" and chicken and waffles (Harlem or California style). Chicken giblets are gone, but chicken livers with gravy are quite popular. There is more fish, and some of it can be obtained grilled rather than fried. The vegetables are not listed casually as in the past, but rather are carefully described for the uninitiated. Instead of "greens" we have "collard greens," and they can be had traditional or vegetarian (that is, with or without smoked pork). Vegetable gumbo is available on weekdays. Oxtail, meat loaf, roast beef, and other dishes that were as much Middle American as Southern have disappeared.¹¹

Sylvia's is near Harlem's main thoroughfare, 125th Street, and around the corner from the Apollo Theater, the neighborhood's leading showplace. The restaurant quickly became known for both its food and the charismatic warmth of Sylvia Woods herself, making it a gathering place for Harlem notables. Sylvia's was by no means unique, for many other well-established Harlem restaurants served Southern food. Copeland's on West 145th Street started as a catering business in 1958 and was rebuilt after a fire in 1981. Wimp's Bakery was famous for its red-velvet cake, but also for smothered chicken, fried and then slow-simmered in gravy. Singleton's continued to serve down-home items like pig ears and hog maws

long after Sylvia's and most other places gave them up; and Wells Supper Club (also known simply as Wells) is often credited with inventing chicken with waffles.¹² Sylvia Woods's cousin and adopted sister, Louise Thompson, opened Louise's Family Restaurant in 1964, and it was well regarded for its smothered chicken, fish and grits, and barbecued ribs. Ms. Thompson died in 1977, and her daughter Julia Wilson, along with her husband, Isaac Wilson, ran it until it closed in 2008.¹³ Other restaurants were established later, such as Charles' Southern Style Kitchen in the 1980s, famous for fried chicken, and Amy Ruth's in 1998. Manna's Soul Food, a buffet restaurant, was founded by Korean-born Betty Park in 1983 and now has three branches in Harlem.¹⁴

Sylvia's achieved distinction by the creation of a welcoming atmosphere that managed to attract celebrities without seeming to shut out the people of the neighborhood. The minister, social activist, and television host Al Sharpton recalls that the King of Soul Music, James Brown, used to come uptown to Harlem just to ride around and dine at Sylvia's, where they sat at whatever table was available—no special treatment. "You haven't been to Harlem if you haven't been to Sylvia's," Brown used to say.¹⁵ There were other places with good food and a warm welcome, but Sylvia Woods, an exuberant optimist, truly loved her customers. As she told her eldest son, Van, after he said she ought to act a little more reserved, her motto was "Give Love, Show Love."¹⁶ Unlike some of the other restaurants featured in this book, Sylvia's showed affection to all, and to this day, political and entertainment notables are not singled out for particular seats or flattery.¹⁷

Sylvia's fame in Harlem did not translate into a citywide reputation, because its founding and prosperity in the 1960s coincided with the increasingly marginalized status of the neighborhood in the mental geography of white New Yorkers. It wasn't just that Harlem was a segregated African American neighborhood, but that it became at once feared and ignored by white outsiders. This invisibility had not always been the rule. Harlem had been the hottest neighborhood in the city for jazz and nightclubbing in the



Fig. 72. Sylvia Woods and her employees outside the restaurant.

1920s and much of the 1930s. Although the "Harlem Renaissance" and the popularity of black-inspired popular culture brought fame and occasionally fortune to musicians like Duke Ellington, writers like Langston Hughes, and singers like Paul Robeson, it also showed the paradoxes and absurdities of deep-seated and seemingly ineradicable discrimination against blacks.¹⁸ Some popular Harlem nightclubs with black jazz and dance entertainment did not admit African Americans as patrons. The blues composer and musician W. C. Handy was turned away from the Cotton Club while his music was being played inside.¹⁹ An English observer during the 1930s remarked that experiencing clubs of this sort allowed the visitor "to see as much of real Harlem as a tourist sees of the African jungle sitting in a cocktail bar in Capetown."²⁰

Some of the Harlem spots of the interwar boom period featured Southern food, or at least fried chicken and barbecued spareribs. The food at nightclubs was more eclectic and in any event dining was not the point of the venue, but it was a profitable aspect as wee-hours expensive snacks accompanied overpriced alcohol. The Cotton Club boasted of its Mexican, Chinese, and Southern food.²¹ A mid-1920s Cotton Club menu offered varieties of chop suey, chow mein, egg foo young, and fried rice.²²

After the Second World War, Harlem felt increasingly isolated, more as a consequence of being ignored than by its own insularity. Its citizens traveled all over the city for work and school, but white people ceased coming to Harlem for entertainment. The Velvet Underground's 1967 song "I'm Waiting for my Man," includes lines emblematic of white assumptions about Harlem like "Hey white boy, what you doin' uptown?"

The foreignness of Harlem in the minds of white New Yorkers provided the context for the sensation created by Gael Greene's review of Sylvia's in the March 1979 issue of *New York Magazine*.²³ As she readily admitted, Greene hadn't been to Harlem "since Rosa Parks refused to sit down at the back of that bus in Montgomery, Alabama . . ." (in other words, the 1950s). This review didn't exactly make the fortunes of Sylvia's, for it was already



CHINESE MENU



<p style="text-align: center;">SOUPS</p> <p>Chicken50 Noodle50 Chicken with Rice50 Tomato with Eggs50</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CHICKEN CHOP SUEY</p> <p>Chicken Chop Suey 1.75 Subgum Chicken Chop Suey 2.00 Chicken Chop Suey w. Mushrooms 2.00 Moo Goo Guy Pan 2.25</p> <p style="text-align: center;">PORK, BEEF CHOP SUEY</p> <p>Pork Chop Suey 1.50 Shrimp Chop Suey 1.75 Beef Chop Suey 1.50 Beef and Tomato 1.50 Pepper Steak 1.50 Pepper Steak w. Mushrooms 1.75</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">FOO YONG DAN (Omelettes) Chinese</p> <p>Meat Foo Yong 1.50 Shrimp Foo Yong 1.75 Chicken Foo Yong 1.75</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CHICKEN CHOW MEIN</p> <p>Chicken Chow Mein 1.50 Chicken Chow Mein w. Mushrooms 1.75 Shrimp Chow Mein 1.75 Roast Pork 1.00</p> <p style="text-align: center;">FRIED RICE</p> <p>Meat Fried Rice 1.25 Shrimp Fried Rice 1.50 Chicken Fried Rice 1.50 Rice, Plain Boiled25</p>
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AMERICAN MENU



<p style="text-align: center;">RELISHES</p> <p>Table Calery50 Queen Olives50 Stuffed Olives50</p> <p style="text-align: center;">STEAKS, ETC.</p> <p>Lamb Chops 1.75 Sirloin Steak 2.00 Filet Mignon 2.25 Steak, Minute 1.75 Broiled Ham Steak 1.50 Welsh Rarebit 1.25 Long Island Rarebit 1.50</p> <p style="text-align: center;">CHICKEN</p> <p>1/2 Broiled Spring Chicken 2.00 Chicken a la King 2.00 Chicken Mexicaine 2.00</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SANDWICHES & CAKES</p> <p>Special Steak 1.75 Club 1.25 Chicken 1.00 Tongue 1.00 Swiss or American Cheese75 Boiled Ham75 Raisin or Pound Cake50 Almond or Marble Cake50</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">CRABMEAT COCKTAIL</p> <p>Crabmeat Cocktail 1.25 Lobster Cocktail 1.50 Shrimp Cocktail 1.25</p> <p style="text-align: center;">COLD MEATS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">With Potato Salad</p> <p>Sliced Cold Chicken 1.75 Smoked Tongue 1.50 Boiled Ham 1.50 Assorted Cold Cuts 1.75</p> <p style="text-align: center;">EGGS</p> <p>Ham or Bacon and Eggs 1.25 Ham Omelette 1.25 Chicken Omelette 1.50 Mushroom Omelette 1.50 Spanish Omelette 1.50</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SALADS</p> <p>Lobster 2.00 Chicken 1.75 Shrimp 1.75 Crabmeat 1.75</p> <p style="text-align: center;">POTATOES, ETC.</p> <p>French Fried50 Hash Brown50 Lyonnais50 Green Peas50 Sliced Tomato50 Hearts of Lettuce50</p> <p style="text-align: center;">COFFEE, TEA, ETC.</p> <p>Tea, Pot35 Coffee, Pot35 Milk50</p> <p style="text-align: center;">SPECIALS</p> <p>Hot Turkey Sandwich 1.50 Steak Sandwich 1.75</p>
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Fig. 73. Menu from the Cotton Club, ca. 1925.

quite successful. Greene noted a sign at the restaurant proclaiming Sylvia Woods "The Queen of Soul Food," a self-coronation that no one in the neighborhood openly disputed. Prominent members of the Harlem political and entertainment worlds already routinely dined there, and a 1979 mention in Harlem's newspaper, the *New York Amsterdam News*, extolled the fried or smothered chicken and the meat loaf.²⁴ Greene's article effectively put the restaurant on the white person's map of the city, however, allowing it to attract new customers while retaining its neighborhood base.²⁵ Greene was surprised at the homey and friendly ambience, and this white restaurant critic's reassurances and the growing attention Sylvia's received from foreign tourists, started to change outsiders' perceptions of Harlem in the 1980s.

Reading Gael Greene's review today shows how strange the city of thirty-five years ago can seem. Greene's editor at *New York* initially opposed the idea of reporting on Sylvia's because that would encourage readers to do "something dangerous," namely visit Harlem. And Greene recollected that at first she was inclined to agree.²⁶ In her review she attributes the then odd idea of venturing into Harlem to a friend she calls the "Rocky Mountain Sybarite." Her initial response was to dismiss the Sybarite's plan as romantic nostalgia for the "bad old good old days" of the Cotton Club and Cole Porter. She also wondered if a white group "ribbing and chicken hopping in Harlem" would be welcomed. Once she overcame her doubts, the trip began inauspiciously, as it proved hard to convince a taxi driver to drive to Harlem, but the welcome at the restaurant was just fine, and in fact Sylvia Woods hugged her.²⁷ The ribs ("they were the why of this exercise") and candied yams ("sugary bliss") were outstanding, and in retrospect Greene remembered the biscuits as well as the ribs as the stars of the show. Not everything took Greene's fancy, however, and the review was not an unalloyed rave. The cornbread was "wishy-washy," Greene reported, and the fried chicken "pedestrian and over-done." The beef stew did not look appealing, but turned out to be full of flavor. The peach cob-



Fig. 74. Sylvia's menu cover.

bler was mediocre, but breakfast was wonderful. One wonders what black readers of *New York* and Sylvia's regular patrons thought of the review and its patronizing tone.

Gael Greene's experiences finished on a positive note—the waitress said, “Thank you and come again,” and Greene concludes the article: “you can bet we will.” A bit like Mimi Sheraton's 1977 review of Rao's, the secretive Italian restaurant in East Harlem, this account of an adventure uptown caught the imagination of those New Yorkers who not only didn't live in Harlem but, like Greene, had avoided it. Rao's, a white-owned Italian restaurant in what was considered a dicey neighborhood (East Harlem) was besieged by random visitors after Sheraton's review, defending itself by in effect becoming a club, for regulars only, and as such it remains. Sylvia's is larger and in other ways different. It never achieved status comparable to that of Rao's among New Yorkers living outside of Harlem, and it never turned away first-time visitors. It did obtain a unique reputation in the minds of people from outside of Harlem and was the only “soul food” restaurant they could name. Former mayor Ed Koch, not surprisingly, believed it was the only actual restaurant in Harlem.²⁸

Still, it was neighborhood reputation that allowed Sylvia's to expand in 1979–1980 by taking over what had been the Uptown Bar next door. It eventually annexed two further store spaces, and currently it seats 450. In the 1980s it flourished as a hangout for political leaders such as borough presidents Percy Sutton and David Dinkins. The latter was New York's only African American mayor, from 1990 to 1994. Al Sharpton recalled that the restaurant was a kind of “neutral space,” where opposing views could be peacefully exchanged.²⁹ The restaurant was a mandatory stop for politicians courting the votes of Harlem residents (hence Koch's impression of its uniqueness). It was also a place where, again according to Sharpton, you had to show up from time to time or else people thought you had retired. Among its regulars were black entertainment and sports stars such as Diana Ross, Quincy Jones, James Brown, and Muhammad Ali.³⁰

In the 1980s, Sylvia's became a stop for tourist buses. At a time when most white New Yorkers still avoided Harlem, European and Japanese tourists were fascinated by its Jazz-Age history and its nascent hip-hop culture. Entrepreneurs such as Moroccan-born Lucien Corcos organized escorted tours of churches and historic sites such as Alexander Hamilton's house on Convent Avenue and the Morris Jumel Mansion on 160th Street, Washington's headquarters during the battle for New York. At eleven a.m. on Sundays, tourists were taken to churches such as First Corinthian Baptist on 116th Street and Seventh Avenue (now Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard) to hear Gospel music and a rousing sermon, followed by a meal at Sylvia's that would introduce the legendary “soul food” cuisine.³¹

It's easy to make fun of these visitors who can hardly be said to have obtained an in-depth impression of Harlem, but it is to their credit that they were motivated enough to do something that never occurred to most white Americans. Sylvia's came in for criticism that it was forsaking its regulars in favor of these tourists who, by definition, couldn't be loyal customers.

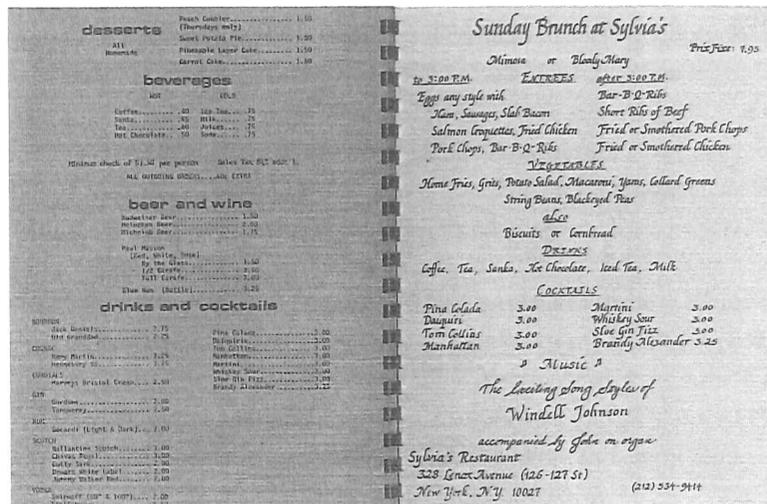


Fig. 75. Sylvia's menu, drinks and brunch specials.

Shortly after Sylvia Woods died, a *New York Times* blog quoted Kelly Smith, a longtime regular, as saying, “It was a neighborhood spot. Then it got so big, locals didn’t go there anymore.” But this is not literally true—the proportion of tourists may be high, but they have not taken over numerically or radically changed the spirit or food of the place. True, chicken gizzards were removed from the menu, along with calf’s liver and onions. There are more grilled dishes, seafood, and salads now. But these changes were in response to local preferences and put in place as Sylvia Woods’s children Bedalia Woods, Crizette Woods, and Kenneth Woods took over.

At one time the restaurant seemed so much a reflection of Sylvia Woods’s personality that some doubted that it could survive her passing. In fact, it has pursued profitable innovations that did not come from Sylvia herself, such as a catering branch started by Bedalia Woods that now accounts for one-quarter of the business.³² Not every new idea has worked smoothly, however, and the restaurant has had particular difficulties expanding. A branch in Atlanta opened in 1997, but did not manage to achieve the fame of its Northern parent and closed in 2005. A Sylvia’s in St. Petersburg, Florida, opened in 2013 in the former Manhattan Casino, a long-abandoned landmark of African American entertainment where Duke Ellington once performed. The premises are owned by the city of St. Petersburg and the restaurant is run under the Sylvia’s name by a nonprofit urban development group.³³

AFRICAN AMERICAN, SOUTHERN, AND AMERICAN CUISINE

The Woods family’s experience of oppression, migration, and enterprise are typical of the history of many African American families. The culinary traditions enshrined in the menus at Sylvia’s—fried chicken, spareribs, greens, barbecue, biscuits—are symbols of black culture and

The image shows a menu for Sylvia's restaurant. The menu is organized into several sections:

- GOOD MORNING BREAKFAST:** Lists items like "Bacon with Eggs or Potatoes", "Pancakes with Syrup", "Hot Ham with Potatoes", "Hot Chicken with Potatoes", "Hot Sausage with Potatoes", "Hot Beef with Potatoes", "Hot Pork with Potatoes", "Hot Turkey with Potatoes", "Hot Chicken with Potatoes", "Hot Beef with Potatoes", "Hot Pork with Potatoes", "Hot Turkey with Potatoes".
- SYLVIA'S DAILY SPECIALS:** Lists items like "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes", "Fried Chicken with Potatoes".
- vegetables:** Lists items like "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb", "Shredded Pork or Lamb".

Fig. 76. Sylvia’s menu, à la carte and daily specials.

self-understanding encapsulated by that now somewhat passé term “soul food.” But even more than being the preserve of a cross-cultural tradition moving among Africa, the South, and the North, the food exemplified by Sylvia’s is a basis for the story of American food.

To describe the African American role in the making of American food would require a book longer than this one, and it has been the object of a number of excellent studies. What is worth emphasizing here, besides the story of a particular restaurant, is how artificial categories such as “soul food,” or even the broader “Southern food” break up the sweep of American culinary invention and adaptation. African American food has a particular set of characteristics and history, but it affects all aspects of America’s culinary evolution, not just those of a so-called minority community. Even in the long years of racial subordination, this overall influence was here-and-there acknowledged by white observers. An article in the *New York Times* on November 10, 1895, for example, stated:

In so far as we have a National cooking it is of African, rather than European origin. Cooking in the U.S. was "treated by slaves and freedmen," in the opinion of many good judges, to results not surpassed by the most sophisticated arts of Gaul.³⁴

On one level this is a perfectly conventional statement for its time. In talking about New Orleans we saw how widespread was the idea among white people that black cooks they enslaved or employed had unusual skills and could reproduce and elaborate on the culinary inventions of Europe and America. The author of the *New York Times* article goes further, however, crediting black cooks with inventing American cuisine, not just acting under white instructions.

More conventionally, during at least the first century after Emancipation, white observers limited the role apportioned to black domestic servants and restaurant owners to a creative but passive guardianship of culinary knowledge. The chapter on Antoine's made mention of the first edition of the *Picayune Creole Cookbook* in 1906, which mourned the passing of a generation of African American cooks who kept alive the home-cooking Creole traditions of the families they served and without whom that tradition was endangered.³⁵

Black cooks' supposed nurturing of white traditions and white writers' admiration for their abilities were enduring ideas. In the 1920s and 1930s, cookbooks written by whites adopting the voice of a black female cook proliferated. The authors of *Aunt Caroline's Dixieland Recipes* (1922) asserted, "In the art of cooking the 'Old Southern Mammy' has few equals and recognizes no peers."³⁶ In some of these books, such as *Aunt Priscilla in the Kitchen* (1929), the recipe is given in what purports to be Southern black dialect, as in this conclusion to a recipe for chili con carne made with chicken: "A wall of nice cooked rice round de edge of yo' dish, wid de chicken an' sauce in de middle am mighty fine." As Jennifer Jensen Wallach remarks, this recipe exemplifies the perverse com-

plexity of American ideas about food and race: instructions for making a Mexican American dish, described by a white woman, and voiced in pseudo-black dialect.³⁷

An American regional cookbook put together for the New York World's Fair of 1939–1940 is full of racist references to dishes invented by "darkie cooks," "mammies," and the like and then appropriated by white people. Catfish curry, for example, was "a Negro favorite, which by virtue of its goodness was taken up to the big house and there remains." This book complacently acknowledges that African American cooks have certain unique skills—only "darkie mammies can make this wonderful dish" (boneless turkey). Generally, however, the role of household cooks is that of ingenious custodians of essentially white culinary traditions.³⁸

In his 1955 *Food Odyssey*, the restaurant evaluator Duncan Hines wrote that almost all famous Southern dishes are the work of "Negro cooks" or show signs of "at least their special touch." Often his observations are coupled with assertions of the instinctual, uneducated nature of this skill, observable especially in the lack of reliance on written texts or precise measurements. Hines condescendingly continues:

They cooked by instinct, these artists of the saucepan and skillet, like a musician who plays by ear, and measured everything as "a smidgen of this and pinch of that"; and their educated hands could tell when bread or pie crust felt just right.³⁹

This instinctual manner of cooking, though, has often been a boast of African American cooks themselves. *Vibration Cooking*, the title of Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor's pioneering cookbook and memoir of 1970, refers to preparing food by using nonformulaic knowledge:

And when I cook, I never measure or weigh anything. I cook by vibration. I can tell by the look and smell of it.⁴⁰

In the 1997 film *Soul Food*, directed by George Tillman, the family matriarch Big Mama Jo tells one of her daughters that she never relies on written recipes and doesn't need to measure out ingredients—it's all in her head.⁴¹

In her two cookbooks, Sylvia Woods, of course, accommodates the home cook who lacks her experience; measurements are precise and steps are spelled out. Cooking is always a skill acquired by experience, in Woods's accounts, not a magical gift, but it is also not something to be followed dutifully according to written instruction either, especially for basic but difficult things like biscuits. It takes some practice to make biscuits, Sylvia Woods asserts, and those made by her longtime Hemingway-born chef Ruth Gully she considered superior to anyone else's. In order to master biscuit making it is important to remember what the dough should feel like. When it comes to pot roast, Woods presents both her recipe and Ruth's, inviting the reader to choose. They are very similar, except that Woods's calls for cooking the meat with A1 and Worcestershire sauce.⁴²

For many years the prevailing official (white) consensus was that black people had a talent for cooking, but didn't create anything other than a marginal kind of food of their own—what then became identified as soul food, set apart from anything whites were interested in. Southern food, on the other hand, was deemed white even if, more often than not, it was cooked by African Americans.⁴³ Arbitrarily barbecue, fried chicken, and biscuits were said to belong to whites while chitterlings (intestines), pigs' ears, poke salat, and paw-paws were marginalized as exclusively black property. Contradicting this orthodoxy, surveys by the South Carolina agricultural experiment station undertaken between 1939 and 1942 showed that African American "dietary habits resembled those of white families in corresponding sections of the state." There were some differences—whites ate shrimp often, while blacks tended to have them only for an occasional breakfast. Hambone with green beans or stewed pears was

distinctly white while hominy or cabbage with fat meat gravy and collards boiled with meat was black.⁴⁴

The "ownership" of Southern food remains controversial, as attested by disputes launched in 2013 by allegations that celebrity restaurateur and chef Paula Deen not only made racist remarks, engaged in sexual harassment, and underpaid her kitchen workers but also presented their recipes as her own creations. One of her African American former collaborators, Dora Charles, recently published a cookbook called *A Real Southern Cook in Her Savannah Kitchen*. On the question of differences between black and white Southern cooking, Ms. Charles said recently "Southern country food is pretty much the same for black people and white people, except most black cooks are more concerned with seasoning." African American cooks often make up their own spice mixtures. For example, "Savannah seasoning" is one of Ms. Charles's favorites. It has Lawry's seasoned salt, garlic, black pepper, and table salt and is used with ribs, pork chops, and baked spaghetti.⁴⁵

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African American cooks, especially those living outside the South, referred to their culinary style as "Southern." One of the first cookbooks published by an African American bears the title *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking*, and it dates from 1881. Its author, Abby Fisher, grew up in South Carolina, married and lived in Mobile, and achieved success as a chef in San Francisco.⁴⁶

Beyond the question of how much similarity there is between black and white Southern cuisine is the larger matter of American food and its black origins. As long ago as 1975, the distinguished anthropologist Sidney Mintz pointed out that African influence permeates all of America, and that one way of understanding the African role in areas such as food is to look at what are considered white Southern practices.⁴⁷ But this observation, the fruit of academic research, is actually not so different from the offhand *New York Times* observation of 1895 quoted earlier.

AFRICA AND THE SLAVE-HOLDING SOUTH

The mainstream of African American cuisine begins, of course, with Africa. This may seem obvious, but how African culinary ingredients and techniques were brought to the New World is still a matter of exploration and debate. There is a certain amount of mythology and invented narratives surrounding the African origins of black American cuisine, but there is no question about the significance of these origins. What would be called “soul food” in the 1960s was the result of West African, Western European, and Native American cooking practices. Even before the seventeenth century, when the African slave trade grew exponentially to provide coerced labor for American sugar, tobacco, rice, indigo, and other international cash crops, there was trade and food exchange between Africa and the rest of the world.⁴⁸ Before 1600, Native American crops such as corn (maize), cassava, and sweet potatoes were already common in West Africa, as were European breeds of pigs and chickens. Arab and East Asian traders brought bananas and plantains to Africa, while Asian rice introduced by the Portuguese was cultivated alongside native African rice. There were limits to this global exchange, such that, for example, certain West African staple ingredients like palm oil, which was used as the basic cooking medium, were unavailable in the Americas, and so was replaced in this case by pork fat.

The Igbo, Mande, and other peoples of western Africa were thus not completely unfamiliar with the American agricultural environment they were forced to confront. The newly enslaved arrivals introduced African watermelon and okra, but other African food crops such as eggplant and millet were already being grown in the New World. Bananas, plantains, kale, black-eyed peas, and peanuts were common to both Africa and America before 1650, even though their origins were diverse. Many of the spices favored by African cooks had also been well known in medieval Europe as a result of Arab and Persian influence. Africans brought long-grain rice

to South Carolina, along with certain ways of preparing one-pot stews.⁴⁹ Yams were an entirely African export, but Africans would also become identified with ingredients and dishes that had New World origins or were eaten by whites as well—cornbread, okra, fat back, chitterlings, and collard greens, for example.⁵⁰

This hardly means that European and African cuisines were similar, but rather that the Portuguese and other intermediaries between the continents had already introduced certain European ingredients to Africa and were familiar with what Africans ate when the Transatlantic slave trade began. Slave ships prepared a rough equivalent of the pounded cooked starch known as “fu fu” in West Africa, made with yams, rice, or cassava and garnished with palm oil and pepper.⁵¹

Those who survived the harrowing journey across the Atlantic were forced into cruel, mostly agricultural, labor. What they consumed depended on several factors, especially climate, which influenced what the staple export crop was, and the lifestyle and business model of the European slave owners.⁵² At one extreme was the Caribbean, where slaves were set to work on the harvesting and processing of sugar. Requiring immense numbers of slaves, sugar was nevertheless hugely profitable. Plantation owners were either absentee proprietors (living in England or the northern American colonies), or remained on the islands for a short time. In any event, they generally did not plan to make a life in the New World but rather to spend their riches in the home country. The population of the British islands such as Barbados, Jamaica, and Antigua was 90 percent of African origin since the native inhabitants died out and the colonists were never enthusiastic about staying. Under such circumstances, slaves were allowed to raise their own crops and feed not only themselves but their masters as well. The Caribbean has a distinctive and African-inspired cuisine, though the Spanish and French colonies reflected more European influence than did the English islands.

An opposite culinary extreme for British America was New England,

which although hardly uninvolved in slavery, had a small slave population and an economy that did not depend on plantation crops. It was settled by Europeans, many of them religious dissenters determined to build a life in the New World rather than returning to Europe, who were uninterested in making a fortune off export crops. This is not to say that they were permanently sectarian in their way of life, nor that they shunned wealth, but New England made its initial fortunes serving as a broker between the Caribbean and Britain and in various other mercantile ventures. What the rural population grew and ate depended on knowledge obtained from the native inhabitants, so for the first century or so of colonization corn, pumpkins, clams, cranberries, and the like replaced English staples such as wheat bread or cake.

The American South resembled the Caribbean in its slave-intensive production of cash crops, but unlike the Caribbean sugar planters, the American slave owners created a life they regarded as permanent rather than becoming absentee landlords or planning a European retirement. Culinary traditions developed through exchanges between Africans and Europeans rather than Africans possessing entirely separate foodways. A dish like sweet-potato pie, identified with African American cuisine, combines the British American predilection for pies and the African American familiarity with yams and sweet potatoes.⁵³

In the nineteenth-century South, cotton was, of course, the great export crop and the economic basis of slavery, but what was referred to as "the peculiar institution" of slavery had not begun as the result of cotton but rather of the profits to be made in sugar, tobacco, indigo, and rice. The coastal regions where these were grown in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the first to develop cuisines that presented overlapping elements of black and white tastes. Coastal South Carolina was given over to rice and indigo cultivation, and while slaves were harshly controlled and not encouraged to establish their own enterprises, an identifiable cuisine with a strong African influence developed. In North Carolina,

Virginia, and Maryland, there was a somewhat greater European (that is, British) influence on what was grown for food and what was prepared. There tobacco was the most profitable crop, and although slave labor was vital to the industry, production was on a smaller scale without the vast concentrations of slave labor characteristic of plantations, thus strengthening the white culinary influence.

Grudgingly or willingly, Southern landowners allowed their slaves license to dig gardens and feed themselves. These "botanical gardens of the dispossessed" were one source of food.⁵⁴ The plantation owner distributed basic items such as cornmeal, salt, bacon, or other lesser cuts of pork. A third source of food for the slaves was what could be foraged or hunted in the woods and fields—opossum, deer, muskrat, squirrel, and also plants such as pokeweed, milkweed, or marsh marigold. Involuntary African migrants retained and adapted their food gathering and preparation customs as well as tastes: a large variety of vegetables flavored with small amounts of meat (often from hunted or trapped animals), fried in oil or grilled. In some cases traditional techniques were applied to new ingredients such as squash, peppers, different kinds of beans, or paw-paws. White Southerners consumed things that slaves (other than house servants) had no access to: coffee, tea, brandy, spices, and imported delicacies such as almonds. Sugar, and therefore desserts, cookies, and sweets were rarely enjoyed by slaves.⁵⁵ This was a contrast created by differential wealth and culinary opportunities, however, not a matter of taste.

In most respects the diets of slaves and white Southerners resembled each other. Both populations ate the meat from pigs, though whites tended to keep the better cuts, the chops and pork roasts, while the slaves were given smaller pieces of meat that were made into stews, or they would use organs such as the intestines (chitterlings) that whites threw away. Slaves were more likely to eat wild as well as cultivated greens. Both blacks and whites ate cornbread, hominy, and grits, but the latter were more likely to have white bread as well.⁵⁶ The similarity of diet between ordinary white

and black people was greater than between master and slave: The poor white population of the nineteenth-century South ate pork from the less prestigious parts of the hog, cornbread, greens, sweet potato pie, candied yams, black-eyed peas, and rice, much like blacks who had largely developed the cultivation and preparation of these staples.⁵⁷

What white plantation owners ate was usually prepared by slaves, and so these African American cooks on occasion became expert in high-end European cookery. Thomas Jefferson's cook, James Hemmings (brother of Jefferson's "companion" Sally Hemmings), traveled with him to Paris, where Jefferson was ambassador from 1784 to 1789. We know Hemmings popularized waffles, bread stuffing, ice cream, and vanilla flavoring.⁵⁸ His influence, and that of other African American chefs who worked for wealthy white families, extended to the general American population. Cookbooks written by members of the Jefferson and Randolph families, such as Mary Randolph's widely read *Virginia Housewife*, include recipes for catfish soup, peanut soup, Virginia gumbo, and other originally African American dishes.⁵⁹

In the North, long before the Civil War, blacks established food businesses to serve a more urban society than that of the South. In the North they also organized services such as catering for bachelors and for moderately well-off households of the sort that couldn't afford a large staff of servants. In post-revolutionary Philadelphia, African American street vendors sold pepperpot—a soup made with tripe, potatoes, spinach, and spices that resembled the more expensive turtle soup. It was partly a West African dish and was even served with a kind of fu fu made from West Indian plantains or cornmeal. Pepperpot was also distantly based on Spanish and Portuguese stews, but mostly was an original adaptation to the products available in Philadelphia. There were dozens of varieties of pepperpot, and it is still a local, if now endangered, specialty.⁶⁰

Robert Bogle was the first of a group of African American caterers in Philadelphia who began as servants for temporary jobs ("public butlers").

Bogle started his business on South Eighth Street in 1812, and by 1830 it was so well known for providing celebratory dinners that Nelson Biddle, a member of what is still one of the most prominent families in Philadelphia, wrote a poetic "ode" to the man whose magnificent meals ushered in the newly christened baby, the blushing maiden's wedding, and the memorial of death. African American caterers eventually formed an association that controlled the catering industry throughout the nineteenth century. The eminent black social scientist and political leader W. E. B. Du Bois remarked that the Philadelphia caterers "took complete leadership of a bewildered group of Negroes, and led them steadily to a degree of affluence, culture and respect such as has probably never been surpassed in the history of the Negro in America."⁶¹

In New York around 1800, as in Philadelphia, African Americans were ubiquitous food street-sellers, particularly offering oysters, which flourished around the islands and marshes of New York Harbor. The most famous vendor was an African American named Thomas Downing, who started harvesting his own oysters to sell and then established a restaurant ("oyster refectory," as it was termed) on the shore so that the oysters could be kept alive in a watery holding tank until needed. Oyster stands were not new, but they tended to be simple to the point of decrepitude, whereas Downing's was gracious and served complex cooked oyster dishes and roasted or raw oysters at elegantly set tables. Thomas's son, George Thomas Downing, opened a full-fledged restaurant in New York in 1842 and a hotel in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1854. After the Civil War, he became the manager of the dining room of the US House of Representatives.⁶²

SOUTHERN FOOD TO SOUL FOOD

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was a well-established African American cuisine, or really a series of local food customs in the

South, where the great majority of black people still lived. Black cooking had much in common with that of white Southerners, and although there were particular kinds of dishes exclusively identified with whites or blacks, class and region mattered as much as, if not more than, race. For the North as well, there was an identifiable African American cuisine before 1920, but the predominance of African Americans in the catering and restaurant business serving a white as well as black clientele meant that African Americans were adept at preparing all kinds of European and American foods.

Beginning in the 1920s restaurants serving the new arrivals from the South, as we have seen, opened in Harlem and other urban black neighborhoods in the North and Midwest. Descriptive terms like "Southern" or "down-home" indicated that they were intended to cater to homesick recent arrivals who did not have the ingredients, equipment, or space to prepare the food of their memories. Not all that different from the trajectory of Chinese and Italian restaurants, these places soon started attracting patrons who had not grown up "down home," wherever that was. The difference was that whites, who might patronize nightclubs in Harlem, were not interested in Southern food, especially the Southern food of poor people, white or black. The new clients were urban-born African Americans.

As the proportion of the black urban population became increasingly Southern or the children of Southerners, down-home cooking tended to become a marker of nostalgia and identity. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator grows up in South Carolina and comes to Harlem after being expelled from college. At first Harlem seems a magical land of opportunity, but he discovers that in the North the oppression of African Americans simply takes different forms. At one point the narrator sees a street vendor selling baked yams and is overcome with longing for home. He buys some yams and suddenly, as he eats them while walking, he feels free. He imagines how shocked his Northern friends would be to

see him enjoying simple country food, and he scorns their unwillingness to acknowledge the things they love that make them who they are: yams, chitterlings, or boiled hog's maw.⁶³

Repeating a pattern from the nineteenth century, African American food entrepreneurs of the early twentieth century sold their goods on the street. Harlem vendors competed to offer Southern specialties such as fried chicken, roast corn, and chitterlings. Lilian Harris Dean, an early migrant who arrived from Mississippi in 1901, became famous as "Pig Foot Mary," and her specialty was celebrated in 1925 by the writer James Weldon Johnson: "Everybody knows 'Mary' and her stand and has been tempted by the smell of her pigs feet, fried chicken and hot corn . . ." ⁶⁴ Restaurants followed, but most of them remained simple establishments, a small step up from a street stand. Some of the more successful Harlem restaurants specialized in fried chicken (Tillie's Chicken Shack), or barbecued ribs (the Bon Goo Barbecue), and they cultivated regulars, provided entertainment (at Tillie's there was a piano available for patrons to play), and each had a special atmosphere.⁶⁵

Urban blacks who had grown up in the North gradually came to identify with what had previously been dismissed as "country." Southern rural food, indicated by tags such as "country" or "Southern," eventually became "soul food," denoting a common possession even for those who had not grown up on a farm in the South. A 1960 article in the African American paper the *Philadelphia Tribune* noted that members of the black elite could be seen eating at a place called Dell's, which served traditional Southern food "which ten years ago was frowned on by the masses of the so-called 'elite' Negro society. Now it's considered fashionable to eat 'down home' cooking."⁶⁶ Within a decade of that article's publication, traditional food was a mark of identity, excluding whites who did not share its emotional background, and it became as much part of black culture as the blues.

"Soul" was first used in conjunction with "brother" and "sister," terms that had established usage in the black church. In 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois

published *The Souls of Black Folk*, which is both a personal and sociological investigation into the lives and outlook of African Americans living under a regime of cultural as well as economic subordination. Among other things it is also one of the earliest accounts of what African Americans ate after Emancipation.⁶⁷ It may seem farfetched to attribute an academic origin to a popular-culture usage, but Du Bois's celebrity status makes it at least possible; this particular book discusses how black people have an inner spirit that is veiled (Du Bois's term) when dealing with the demands and contempt of whites. Another effort to separate African American self-conceptions from white categories came in the 1930s when the newspaper the *Chicago Defender* campaigned to get black people to call themselves "Race Men" rather than "Colored" or "Negroes," both of which were white-defined phenotype categories.

None of this proves that "soul" was specifically applied to food before the 1960s, but does suggest there was a context for identifying African American cuisine with a creative tradition independent of white-imposed definitions. By the mid-1960s "soul" started being used as an adjective meaning not just something produced by or resonant with black people, but an expression of ethnic identity. It was applied to music—not so much the traditional music of the South or blues or Gospel, but the commercial songs of popular singers and styles, from James Brown to Motown. Soon "soul" was a marketing term that could include combs, hairdos, and, finally, food.⁶⁸

The emergence of "soul food" to describe what was previously "down-home" or Southern coincided with changes occurring in the civil rights movement. The mid-1960s saw a shift in African American strategies away from alliances with whites to achieve integration and toward the assertion of African American cultural as well as political autonomy, encapsulated by the Black Power movement. Rather than aiming at a world in which race wouldn't matter, advocates of Black Power such as Stokely Carmichael (who later changed his name to Kwame Touré) extolled the culture

of African Americans and restricted access to its legitimate appreciation. In an interview with the *New York Times* in 1966, Carmichael expressed what would soon become an African American consensus: that white people who claimed to be part of the movement couldn't embrace what it was to be black. Specifically they "cannot relate to chitterlings, hog's head cheese, pig feet, ham hocks, and cannot relate to slavery, because these things are not part of their experience."⁶⁹

The Black Power movement marks an obvious turning point in race relations and politics. Assertions of African American difference challenged complacent assumptions that everyone would become like white people. In the limited field of food culture, however, cultural nationalism was neither completely successful nor really accurate. As culinary historian Adrian Miller remarks, a four-hundred-year old cuisine blending African, European, and Native American contributions was now black-owned, and that even without any connection to the South, a black person was defined by this food. Carmichael grew up in Trinidad and, apart from his activities as an organizer for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had no experience living in the American South, so, as Miller goes on to say, he was presumably unaware that rural whites and blacks had a similar diet.⁷⁰ An elderly African American observer from Atlanta recently interviewed by Frederick Opie concludes, "I don't know any of those so-called soul food items that southern Euro-Americans particularly did not eat."⁷¹

Whether or not the term "soul food" adequately describes the range of African American cooking is debatable, and in the twenty-first century its use has waned. In embracing the term, Sylvia Woods simply accepted the prevailing formulation of the late 1960s. Some other prominent female chefs who perfected personal and regional takes on African American food carefully avoided calling their cuisine "soul food." Edna Lewis came from Freetown, Virginia, a community of blacks freed even before the abolition of slavery, and spent much of her career at white-owned restaurants

in New York. In a 1996 interview with the magazine *Southern Living* she rejected the term “soul food” to describe her cooking: “That’s hard times in Harlem, not true Southern food.”⁷² Lewis’s second cookbook, published in 1976 at the height of the soul food movement, was entitled *The Taste of Country Cooking*, and the last (2003) was called *The Gift of Southern Cooking*.

Other chefs simply ignored “soul” because it obscured their own distinctiveness. Leah Chase, a prominent African American restaurateur from New Orleans, was asked by a BBC television host if she considered her food soul or Creole. Without elaboration she said Creole.⁷³ These women were authors of cookbooks that have achieved more fame than the two collections of relatively basic recipes that Sylvia Woods published. Edna Lewis’s cookbooks, for example, include information about the dishes featured along with reminiscences and culinary history, while Leah Chase’s *The Dookey Chase Cookbook* reflects the cooking of her restaurant in New Orleans that, like Sylvia’s, was both a culinary landmark and a meeting place for black political and cultural leaders.⁷⁴

Even forceful advocates of black identity did not necessarily accept the importance of soul food, however. Some dismissed it as simply poor people’s food. Eldridge Cleaver, author of the 1968 bestseller *Soul on Ice*, said people in the ghettos didn’t actually like soul food much: they preferred steaks, just as white people did.⁷⁵ The Nation of Islam, a movement that achieved fame and power in the 1960s under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, denounced what it called the “slave diet” imposed on blacks as part of a conspiracy to undermine their health. Pork (forbidden to Muslims), was especially criticized, but so were black-eyed peas and cornbread. In *How to Eat to Live* (1967) and *How to Eat to Live, Book 2* (1972), Muhammad promoted whole grains, brown rice, and vegetables. A sweet-bean pie was one of the leader’s favorites and a feature of Black Muslim bakeries that proliferated in the 1970s.⁷⁶

The famed comedian Dick Gregory became a vegetarian in 1963. In the beginning this was a reaction against cruelty to animals, but gradually

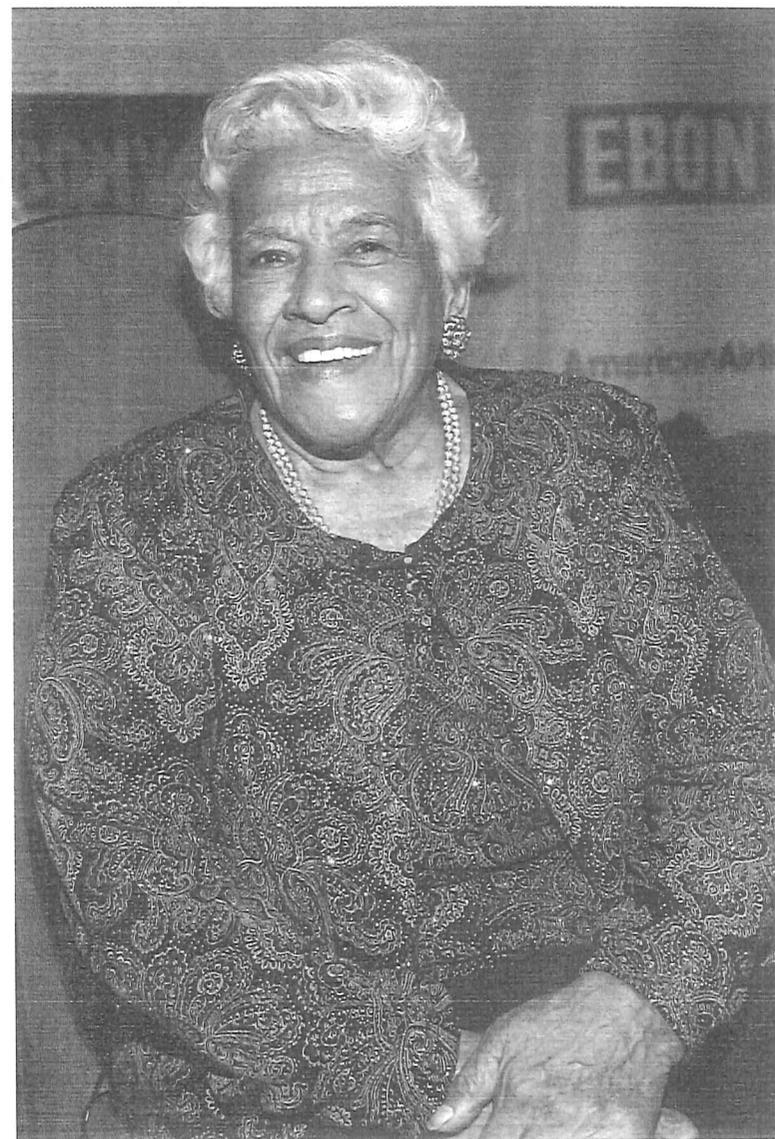


Fig. 77. Leah Chase, 2006.

Gregory felt that black people needed to make a radical change in diet to save them from the bad health effects of what they were eating. Beginning in 1967, Gregory promoted the nutritionist Alvenia M. Fulton's ideas, which advocated what she called "soul food with a mission." They collaborated on *Dick Gregory's Natural Diet for Folks Who Eat: Cookin' with Mother Nature*, which appeared in 1973. In this book soul food is held responsible for the symptoms of ill health suffered by the black community, from baldness (not very likely) to hypertension (certainly correlated with a high-cholesterol diet). According to Gregory, leaders who promoted soul food as a treasured black cultural expression were guilty of undermining, even murdering, their own people.⁷⁷

Is soul food really to blame for African American health problems related to nutrition? Probably not, on two grounds: first is the difference between what people in the rural South and urban North ate, and second is the far greater harmful significance of fast foods, sugared drinks, and other aspects of contemporary life. As with many cuisines that developed in a rural and poor environment, African Americans' diets originally didn't have very much meat, fat, or sugar, emphasizing vegetables instead, and offered a variety of different foodstuffs. What restaurants served (the North being much more restaurant-oriented in the first place) was weighted toward meat courses with vegetables as small supplements, a contrast with the real diet of the Southern countryside, where people grew their own food. Living conditions in Northern cities were hardly ideal, but there was less physical labor than on farms and more sugar, meat fat, and carbohydrates available. This is not to say that Southern or soul food was particularly healthful; no food of real poverty is. What really would cause the problems of obesity, diabetes, and hypertension, however, was the modern diet of fast foods, processed foods, large portion sizes, sodas, and a largely sedentary lifestyle. This is related to class as much as race, and many of the poor areas in the United States with severe health prob-

lems such as obesity (South Dakota and Appalachia, for example) have few African American residents.

What undermined soul food was not so much the attacks by nutrition advocates but rather its shriveling historical roots in the South. Agriculture became mechanized, African American farms became rare, and pizza, burgers, doughnuts, and the like took over there, just like everywhere else, as the nation's cuisine became homogenized. There have been efforts to modernize soul food or to make it more healthful. *Soul Food Love*, a recent cookbook by Alice Randall and her daughter Caroline Randall Williams, begins with an absorbing account of one family's food traditions, discussing the health damage inflicted both by these traditions and by modern life and diet. The recipes are innovative—chicken breasts with grapes and mushrooms, broccoli with peanuts and raisins—but greens, sweet potatoes, and shrimp in a stew make appearances even if pork or red meat do not.⁷⁸

Sylvia Woods staked her claim as the Queen of Soul Food not as an assertion of black identity against a hegemonic white culture but as a form of language, a culinary shorthand, to describe what she had always been cooking and what she considered the tradition of her Southern childhood and youth. Despite the legal progress against discrimination, African Americans (then as now) lived apart from whites. For at least the first two decades of her restaurant's history, whatever she called her food, Sylvia Woods was completely dependent on a black clientele. Her customers might have been seeking out the food they had always eaten, or the food of their childhood, but whatever their motives, they were African American. Soul food and Southern food might be quite similar, but until recently blacks and whites shared an interest in minimizing the connections. Ironically, as appreciation of culinary history has grown recently, both Southern and soul cuisines have experienced a gentle, stately fading-away, one that Sylvia's has so far resisted.

HARLEM TODAY

The decline of traditional African American food in Harlem is not due entirely to large cultural shifts. Restaurants less agile and famous than Sylvia's have been damaged by the newfound desirability of Harlem as a residential mecca for young, affluent white as well as black people. Waning connections between North and South, the image of African American Southern food as unhealthy, and the gentrification of Harlem are factors in the decline of the traditional Harlem restaurant. Prosperity, rising property values, as well as changes in the perception of what constitutes traditional African American food have destroyed more restaurants than the abandonment and disorder of the late-twentieth century. Copeland's survived the decline of Harlem as well as a fire in 1981, but its curtain finally came down in 2007 and its owner, Calvin Copeland, blamed a lack of business on gentrification.⁷⁹ Wilson's, M & G Diner, Pan Pan Restaurant, Wimp's Bakery, Louise's, Singleton's, and the Wells Supper Club are other venerable Harlem institutions that have closed in recent years.⁸⁰

Beginning around 2000, these mainstays were supplemented and, to some extent, supplanted by restaurants offering lighter takes on such things as collard greens, flavored with other vegetables rather than smoked pork, but many of these newcomers—Mobay Café, Raw Soul, Native, or Veg—didn't last.⁸¹ New restaurants open up all the time in Harlem, as everywhere else, but most of them are not particularly African American, at least with regard what has traditionally been understood to be "soul food."⁸² A recent list of the "Top Ten" Harlem restaurants includes an Ethiopian restaurant; a branch of Dinosaur, a national barbecue chain; an Italian American holdout (Patsy's); a ramen place; a Puerto Rican cuchifritos specialist; and one traditional neighborhood restaurant, Charles' (now called Charles' Country Pan-Fried Chicken).⁸³

Red Rooster, located right down the street from Sylvia's, is a special case that has experienced enviable success. This is partly due to its famous

owner, Marcus Samuelsson, but also because it is able to present dishes such as chicken and waffles with a vibe that somehow makes them seem healthful without being particularly different from what people ate at the old-fashioned places. Sylvia's not only managed to survive Harlem's hard decades that followed its opening, but it continued to do well in the first decades of the twenty-first century. According to Lindsey Williams, grandson of Sylvia Woods, Red Rooster has been a positive draw for business, increasing rather than taking away from customers at Sylvia's.⁸⁴

Perhaps Antoine's is closest to Sylvia's when it comes to proudly and persistently upholding a fragile tradition. This is only ironic on the surface—a New Orleans restaurant with a white, upper-class tradition and a black restaurant in the North. Both preserve a past that is widely admired but not emulated—remaining vital, beautiful, and nonetheless endangered.