

# Gourmet

1940s Archive

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## SHIP'S FARE

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For the past twenty years now, ever since I first set foot on an ocean liner, I've been haunted by the persistent rumor that food on board ship is good and plentiful "because most of the passengers are too sick to eat."

Evidently such rumors are spread by the unfortunate people suffering from what the French call delicately *le mal de mer*, a humiliating ill that knows no boundaries of cabin class, banking account, or birth. And truly, if there exists a fate worse than death, it must be to lie in agony on one's deck chair at dinnertime when the stewards carry trays with food past one's eyes and delicate aromas from the dining room drift up. In such moments the very thought of food is enough to make one wince.

Especially when they have *coquilles Saint-Jacques*, prepared with herbs and served in a scallop shell, *merlan a la dieppoise*, or *matelote d'anguille*, eel cooked in red wine with mushrooms and onions. For some reason, which has never failed to puzzle me, fish and sea food are more repulsive to seasick people than anything else.

The fact is that food aboard ship was not always goo and plentiful and isn't always even today. Quite a few of the so-called luxury liners, which come fully equipped with swimming pools, press agents, good-looking officers, an arrogant *maitres d'hotel*, don't give the passengers the pleasure of eating. They merely feed them.

I've also heard that for reasons of economy the best meals aboard are always prepared on stormy days when relatively few passengers are expected to appear in the dining room. This is so much baloney. The word "economy" did not exist aboard ship in the good old prewar days. Prodigal waste was the keynote. Everything, from hors d'oeuvre to dessert, was prepared in sufficient quantities for all passengers. If it happened that few of them felt like eating, so much the worse. Out went the stuff through the porthole.

The truth is that food aboard ship is plentiful because sailors, like hunters, lumbermen, and cowboys, live and work outside in fresh air which makes for healthy appetites. When I grew up in Central Europe, five hundred miles away from the nearest seacoast, the family doctor sent me to the North Sea to cure my bad appetite and sallow complexion. I don't know whether the invigorating aroma of algae and seaweed did me any good, but in the years that followed I have often been known to show more appetite than was healthy for my pocketbook, if not for myself. There seems to be a diabolic inverse ratio between wealth and appetite; people usually start out hungry and poor and work hard to overcome both handicaps, but by the time they have amassed enough money to eat well, they also have the ulcers that go with the making of too much money and can't enjoy their food.

If you belong to the unfortunate people who have to diet (or, even worse, *like* it), don't travel aboard ship. There are too many days of good eating stretching out before you between New York and Europe. Take a plane and get the good eating over with in a day. There are culinary temptations in the stratosphere nowadays, but my first flight across the Atlantic was not one of them. It was during the war, on a bucket seat. The monotony of K rations was interrupted by the monotony of three meals in Greenland, Iceland, and Prestwick, Scotland, each consisting of pork chops, mashed potatoes, and applesauce, owing no doubt to the perverted whim of a U. S. Army quartermaster colonel.

Today's air travelers speak highly of meals served aboard the airships of Air France. This line had the eminently sensible idea to serve champagne, which is not only good publicity but also an effective remedy against air sickness. A typical French dinner served thousands of feet over the Big Pond began with the chef's special *canapes* and ended with said antidote for *mal de ciel*:

*Diner*

*Petits Canapes du Chef*

*Aspic de Foie Gras Strasbourgeoise*

*Filet Mignon Petit Due*

*Petites Pommes Parisienne*

*Haricots Verts Maitre d'Hotel*

*Salade d'Endives*

*Plateau de Fromages*

*Glace Vanille-Chocolat*

*Petits Fours Secs*

*Fruits de Saison*

*Champagne*

For breakfast the same day, there was no champagne, but there were fruits and fruit juices, *cafe au lait*—and black, too, if it was wanted—tea, and chocolate, boiled eggs, an orange marmalade, all in the American and British tradition. But there were those two specialties of the French breakfast table of which most Americans have yet to learn the matutinal joys: *croissants* and *brioches*. Thus, high over the waters of the Atlantic, the France-bound passenger may break his fast on a France-bound custom of light an crunchy *croissants* and *chocolat*.

In the past twenty years competition has raised the standard of cuisine at sea. Prior to World War II there was a good choice among half a dozen shipping companies that would take you from America to Europe and vice versa at the same time and for the same price. Some people would choose boats that offered the largest staterooms, the most lifeboats, or the brightest funnels. Personally, I have always preferred the ones that give me the best *plaisirs de la table*.

In the golden thirties the best cuisine at sea was pretty good indeed. I challenge anybody to name half a dozen restaurants in France or elsewhere which had the consistently high culinary standard of, say, the “Ile de France” or the “Normandie.” Or of some Italian liners, notably the “Rex”; and, if you happen to be an addict of the complex cold table, of some Dutch or Swedish ships. However, in general excellence of cuisine, appreciation of minute detail, composition of menus, and quality of wines, none of them compared with the best French Line vessels.

There were certain flaws proving that nothing on earth (or sea) is perfect. The morning coffee on the liners of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique had no resemblance to the beverage of the same name. As one who likes to start the day with a small cup of concentrated, highly aromatic poison, I have often been bothered by this shortcoming. The stewards explained that “the water wasn't right.” Last year, on board the “De Grasse,” the water seemed all right, but now “the salty air wasn't right.”

However, everything that came *after* the coffee was delicious. There were a few people who criticized the food when they should really have criticized themselves. Most people on board ship eat too much. Even if you've played shuffleboard or deck tennis or made your seventeen rounds around the promenade deck, it is hard to work up an appetite big enough for three big meals a day, with drinks, teas, pastries, sandwiches, snacks, and what not in between.

I believe many people eat too much because they live under the delusion that it's all free. Shipboard menus show a gratifying absence of prices. Everything is printed in the middle; no columns appear with forbidding figures on the right side; there are no checks after dinner. Of course you've already paid for your meals (and handsomely too) but maybe you've forgotten. And if you haven't, you may say to yourself that you want to get all there is for your money. Alas, such commercial contemplations are not apt to secure the success of your dinner. You have finished a sumptuous meal, choosing practically everything there was on the menu, down to the magnificent cheeses, a mild Port Salut and a Camembert which is just ripe (the French now call it “export” Camembert because only the mellow vintage cheeses are being sent out of the country while the cheese-conscious French must

eat cheese that has had no time to mature). You are ready for coffee and brandy and maybe some fruit. Just then the waiter captain approaches you with that certain glint in his eye; hope for a generous tip at the end of the trip (Thesaurus of International Table Manners), and inquires whether you would be in the mood for a delicious *soufflé chocolat* which happens to be the specialty of the *pâtissier*, or whether he, the captain, could prepare for you, an in front of you, his notable *crêpes* (Suzette, yes).

Now suppose that your luncheon was what I had on April 9, 1948, aboard the “De Grasse”;

*Sardines à l'Huile*

*Andouille de Vire*

*Salade Soissonnaise*

*Mélange Nicoise*

*Beurre d'Isigny*

*Langouste Froide Mayonnaise*

*Foie de Veau Tyrolienne*

*Carottes à la Vicby*

*Entrecôte Grillée Maître d'Hôtel*

*Pommes Soufflées*

*Salade Panachée*

*Gruyère-Demi Sel-Gorgonzola*

Suppose that you did succumb to the blandishments of the captain and ordered *crêpes Suzette*; suppose further that only a few hours earlier you had a regular ship's breakfast (grapefruit, omelette Savoyarde, toast, butter—an what marvelous *beurre d'Isigny* it was!—jam, coffee). How, for the love of Escoffier, can you sit down a few hours later and order your dinner, along the sumptuous lines of your luncheon, only more so? You would need the rugged constitution of a medieval glutton to stand the strain.

Yet in those old days there was no such thing as *cuisine* at sea. According to an old chronicle, “Pilgrims had to get their food ashore whenever the ship called at a port.... It was up to the chief steward to supply good bread, good biscuit, good wine, fresh water, meat and eggs of good quality; ships were not equipped to carry such items and often there was no water aboard and the only food available was dry beans seasoned with vinegar and spoiled biscuits. A wise pilgrim never set on a trip without a larder full of ham, smoked or salted meat, hard cheese, pickled food that could be kept in good condition for a long time.... A typical menu consisted of a glass of Malvoisie wine, lettuce with oil as an hors d'oeuvre, a dish of lamb, flour pudding, and coarse Cretan cheese. Bread was available only for a brief period after port calls; usually after the fifth day it was replaced by biscuit....”

When Benjamin Franklin traveled from England to America, he made several comments on the wretched food on board, which proves that he paid more attention to matters of the palate than Puritans usually did: “September 2nd ... We have harpooned three dolphins and had them for dinner. The taste is not bad. We had enough for the whole crew which totals twenty-one persons. ... September 20th. The wind has shifted back to West, much to our disappointment. Our ration has been reduced to two and a half biscuits a day. ... September 21st. This morning, our chief steward has been whipped for having foolishly wasted time in making puddings, and for other misdeeds....”

Ben arrived in Philadelphia on October 11, 1762, after sixty-seven days of crossing. (I remember a crossing aboard the “Normandie,” in the summer of 1935, when the passengers were in a mutinous mood because the liner had failed to break its previously established record of four days and six minutes, Bishop's Rock to Ambrose, at an average speed of 30.99 knots an hour.)

An interesting comment on ship's fare in the earliest days of steamship navigation can be found in Charles Dickens' *American Notes*: “At one, a bell rings, and the stewardess comes down with a steaming dish of baked potatoes, and another of roasted apples; and plates of pig's face, cold ham, salt beef; or perhaps a smoking mess of rare hot collops. We fall to upon these dainties; eat as much as we can (we have great appetites now); and are as long as possible about it.... At five, another bell rings, and the stewardess reappears with another dish of potatoes—boiled this time—and store of hot meat of various kinds; not forgetting the roast pig, to be taken medicinally. We sit down at table again; prolong the meal with a rather mouldy dessert of apples, grapes, and oranges; and drink our wine and brandy-and-water....”

Even after the beginning of steamship navigation the situation didn't improve at once. “A cabin boy would be entrusted with the task of preparing meals—often he is ignorant and very dirty.” And I remember the bitter reminiscences of an old Parisian friend who went to America in 1907 aboard the “Provence” and was served salted pork and *baricots blancs* every other day. Only after the British launched the “Lusitania” and the French the “France,” in 1910, did the shipping magnates realize that good food, good wines, and good service were as important as de luxe suites and Gobelin tapestries.

Since then, rapid strides have been made to assure the passengers the pleasures of the palate. I recall a trip aboard the “Normandie,” in July, 1939. Here is a typical menu:

## MENU

Jeudi 27 Juillet 1939

Menu Suggestion

\* \* \*

*Hors-d'Oeuvre à la Française*

*Petite Truite de Rivière Belle Meunière*

*Le Quartier d'Agneau*

*à la Mode d'Aquitaine*

*Flageolets Frais Maître d'Hotel*

*Salade de Saison*

*Le Plateau de Fromages*

*Pâtisserie Parisienne*

*Corbeille de Fruits*

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## PAQUEBOT “NORMANDIE”

Down the left panel of the menu was aligned the a la carte portion of the menu in French, from *bors-d'oeuvre* to *café*, including the usuals that every menu knows, plus a daily *spécialité régionale*. The right panel repeated the menu in English.

There were three kinds of consommé, five different kinds of ham, the galaxy of cheeses, three kinds of coffee, an seven kinds of tea.

The “Normandie” had a kitchen sixty feet long (“longer than Broadway is wide”) and seventeen feet wide, with an electric range that had thirty hot plates and thirty-two ovens. The staff consisted of 187 cooks, 9 butchers, 6 wine stewards, 10 bakers, and 15 pastry cooks. For each trip the ship took on 60,000 eggs, 4,000 chickens, 20 tons of potatoes, 16 tons of meat, 6 tons of fish, 24,000 liters of wine, 7,000 bottles of fine wine and champagne. The pantry included some 28,000 plates and 30,000 glasses.

To me, the remarkable thing about these statistics is not their Gargantuan proportions but the fact that the chefs of the “Normandie” never permitted themselves to sacrifice quality for quantity. Every dish leaving the kitchen had that certain flavor, that intangible extra which distinguishes a good restaurant from a merely passable one. Even such relatively simple dishes as *choucroute garnie*, Alsace's contribution to French cuisine, or *queue de boeuf à la bourguignonne*, an oxtail stew cooked in three parts red wine to one part water, betrayed the fine hand of a master. And I will always remember the *petites bouchées dites à la Béchamel* (small *volarvent* filled with a *bache* of white chicken meat, ham, truffles, and *champignons*, simmered in bechamel sauce, seasoned with salt, pepper, nutmeg), such as I have never found ashore.

If you still aren't convinced, here is, for the sake of nostalgia, the menu of the *diner de gala*, also known as Captain's Dinner, on the “Normandie” of July 28, 1938:

*Le Caviar Frais du Golfe de Riga*

*Pain de Seigle-Toast Melba*

*Consommé Double aux*

*Pommes d'Amour*

*Filets de Sole Mirosmesnil*

*Suprême de Bresse Ile-de-France*

*Asperges de Lauris à l'Huile Douce*

*Selle de Bébague Rotie à la Broche*

*Pommes Lorette*

*Terrine de Foie Gras de Strasbourg*

*Salade Fancbon*

*Boule de Neige*

*Corbeille de Frivolites*

*Fruits Rafraicbis an Marasquin*

Any complaint?

The “Normandie” is gone, and with her went quite a few things of The Good Life. (A Belgian friend of mine, now living in Manhattan, still has a last bottle of a memorable Kressman Armagnac, several of which he bought from remaining stocks of the “Normandie” and nursed through the bad, Armagnacless war years.) When I went to Europe last year, aboard the “De Grasse,”

which is carrying on bravely until the bigger ships, "Ile de France" and "Liberte" will be put into service, a few changes had been made. The menu, still high in quality, now feature only a couple of entrees, one of them fish, instead of half a dozen, and only one main dish, not eight or nine, as in the old days. No longer did I find on my table a bottle of Bordeaux Rouge Supérieur, one of Bordeaux Blanc Supérieur, and one of Bourgogne Blanc Supérieur. Instead the steward would ask me what kind of wine I wished and then he would fill my glass and take the bottle away. Still, he would fill my glass as often as I desired.

A general sense of economy prevailed throughout the ship. No food was being thrown out through the porthole. Downstairs in the large kitchen there was the businesslike concentration that you always find in a French kitchen where cooking is taken seriously, as it should. But now it seemed to me as though the chefs were more intent than before. I heard one cook say to a helper, "Get me eighty chickens, *mon petit*." He started to count silently and said, "That should be enough for 320 orders. We'll leave twenty chickens in reserve." He turned to me and said, "*Qu'est-ce que vous voulez, monsieur?* One has to count nowadays. In the old days we would have prepared four hundred orders, and, if they didn't eat, there was always the porthole. But when you have been with the *maquis*, as many of us were, and you didn't see butter and milk and eggs and other good things for years, you just can't waste food the way we used to."

All of which should not give you the wrong idea. I remember a small dinner party which M. Robert Bellet, the *commissaire principal*, as the purser is called, gave me on the occasion of my birthday anniversary.

*Le Melon Honeydew Frappé*

*Les Filets de Sole Dugléré*

*La Noisette d'Agnelet Châtelaine*

*Les Pointes d'Asperges à l'Argenteuil*

*Le Medaillon de Foie Gras Truffé*

*La Salade Caprice*

*Les Framboises Givrées Melba*

*Les Friandises*

*La Corbeille de Fruits*

The sole, prepared after the recipe of Jean Pierre Duglere with white wine, mushrooms, and tomatoes, was real sole, not the imitation that one gets so often on the western shores of the Atlantic, and it fairly melted in the mouth. The lamb was done with chestnuts. We had a Chassagne-Montrachet 1937, a Marquis de Terne 1924, and vintage champagne. (There were a few choice vintages in the cellars, a fine Chateau Latour 1924, and an excellent Chateau Yquem of the same great year.)

It was a memorable birthday lunch. As we left the dining room and went up on deck, a big ocean liner was passing by. I saw the name on the hull, "Mauretania." I had made a crossing aboard her, back in 1942, paid for by the United States Army, in the company of some 8,000 GI's. The food, if you insist on calling it that, had been somewhat different then. It was prepared by British Navy cooks—or, rather, by obnoxious gremlins disguised as British Navy cooks. There were no menus on the tables. In fact, there were no tables. It was the only ocean trip in my life when I was always hungry.

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