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Opening Extract from...

Who Put the Beef in Wellington

Written by James Winter

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A vintage portrait of a man in a chef's uniform, standing next to a wooden table with a red book and a hat. The photo is mounted on a yellowed, torn piece of paper.

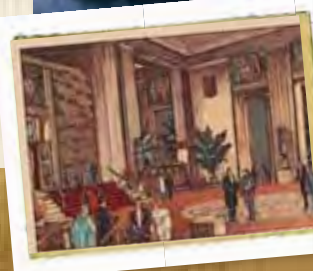
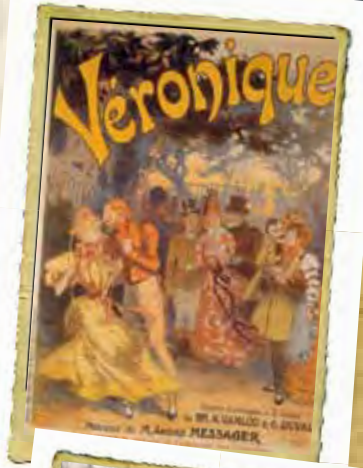
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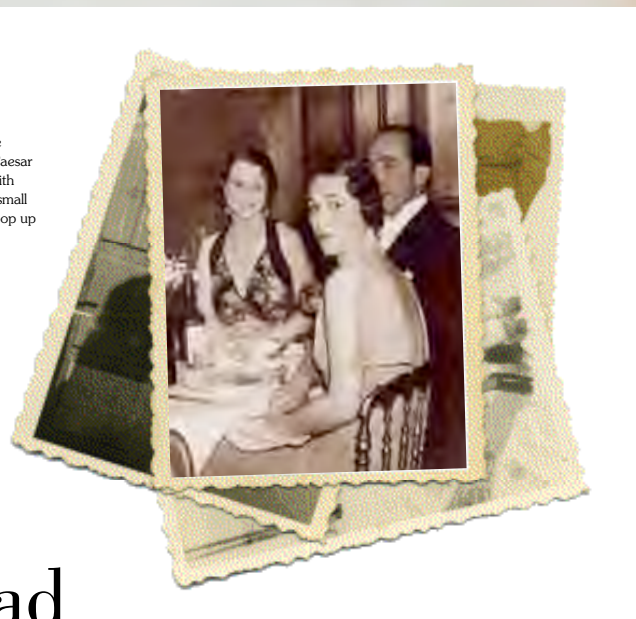
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A Polaroid photograph of a young child with dark hair, wearing a light-colored, ruffled shirt, looking directly at the camera. The photo is mounted on a textured, light-colored card.



right Wallis Simpson, the famous socialite, loved Caesar Salad but hated eating with her fingers, so she used small portions of lettuce to scoop up the salad.



Caesar Salad

It has to be said that, for most of us, the word ‘salad’ does not conjure up feelings of enormous excitement. It’s a culinary option associated with diet and denial; the dish on the menu you choose when you want something else but know you shouldn’t. However, put the name Caesar in front of it and you instantly have an image of Saturday night indulgence; of rich dressing and salty umami goodness that turn a plain old lettuce leaf into a vessel for the most famous salad ingredients in the world.

Caesar Salad is so luxurious that it may surprise you to learn that its origins lie in 1920s America, where Prohibition was in full force. The ban on alcohol was introduced in 1920 with the aim of reducing political and social corruption and domestic violence. What actually happened was that organised gangs began producing alcohol on a large scale to supply to their illegal drinking dens or speakeasies. Not surprisingly, restaurateurs who kept on the right side of the law struggled with the downturn in business that Prohibition had brought with it.

One of these law-abiding citizens was Caesar Cardini who, from his restaurant in San Diego, California, looked enviously down the road to

Mexico, where there was a different attitude to drinking. So Caesar and his brother Alex decided to open their second Caesar’s Italian restaurant just across the border in Tijuana.

Soon stars of stage and screen were rushing down in their drop-top Cadillacs to eat and drink. The story goes that, on 4 July 1924, there were so many of them that food supplies began to run low. There was little in the fridge except lettuce, and with so much liquor flowing Caesar needed something to fill hungry stomachs. A bit of a showman himself, he struck upon the idea of preparing a salad at the table, in front of his guests: ‘Let them think they are having our speciality,’ he cried. And so it began.

I don’t need to tell you that it was a huge hit. Caesar Salad was the food sensation of the 1920s, with everyone from Clark Gable to W C Fields making the pilgrimage to Tijuana to eat it. ‘Going for a Caesar’ became the hip holiday for the hippest of crowds.

Hippest of the hip in the 1930s was the socialite Wallis Simpson, future Duchess of Windsor. She fell for Caesar Salad on one of her many trips to Tijuana and made sure all her important friends – from Baron Rothschild to Yves Saint Laurent – tried it. She also took the recipe to Europe and demanded that the chefs in many of the continent’s top restaurants prepare it to her instruction. Legend has it that Wallis was the first to cut the lettuce into delicate, bite-sized pieces so that it need not be eaten with the fingers.

In 1938 the Cardinis moved to Los Angeles, where Caesar opened a gourmet food store and, working with his daughter Rosa, began to bottle and sell his dressing across America. One version of the story describes his early patrons arriving with empty wine bottles to be filled with dressing; another says that their enterprise started with bottling and labelling at home, then selling from the back of the family station wagon at the local farmers’ market.

Meanwhile, the dish took on a life of its own; people began to add chicken or fish to the salad to bulk it up, while at a later restaurant, Alex Cardini launched a variation with whole anchovies on top, which he called an Aviator Salad. (Caesar himself disapproved of this; he believed the subtlety of the salad would be overwhelmed by the oily fish. The now familiar fishy tang in the dressing comes from the Worcestershire sauce alone.)

A further lease of life came when the American chef Julia Child demonstrated the recipe on TV in the 1970s. She had been taken to Caesar’s as a child in the 1920s and later wrote that her parents were ‘so excited when big jolly Caesar himself came to the table to make the salad...it was dramatic: I remember... how he tossed the leaves so that it looked like a wave turning over.’ When she



above Film stars Clark Gable and Loretta Young, part of the hip crowd that travelled to Mexico to enjoy a Caesar.

became a television chef she contacted Rosa for the authentic recipe – with no anchovies.

Caesar Salad remains a great dish to throw into your dinner parties, especially if you do it Cardini-style at the table. Or you can have it alone with a good film and a glass of crisp Sauvignon – or tequila, if you like your showbiz lifestyle. I dare you not to love it. Show me a person who doesn’t like a Caesar Salad and I’ll show you my hen’s teeth risotto!

right Clark Gable loved going for a Caesar and stars like him helped popularise the dish.





left TV chef Julia Child became a champion of the Caesar Salad in the 1970s.

CAESAR SALAD

Crunchy fresh lettuce is the key to this dish, wash it well and dry it thoroughly before use. Feel free to add chicken to this dish if you want to make it more substantial but for parties keep it simple and light.

Pour the oil into a saucepan and add the garlic. Gently warm the oil over a low heat. You are not trying to fry the garlic but get the oil to blood temperature. Remove from the heat off and set aside for about 30 minutes.

Put the egg into a saucepan of cold water and bring to the boil. Boil for 1 minute and then plunge the egg into cold water to stop the cooking process. Crack the egg into a food processor and add the garlic, lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce and olive oil. Process well and season with pepper to taste.

Fry the bread cubes in a little olive oil until golden and crispy, then set aside to drain on kitchen paper.

To serve, place the Romaine lettuce in a bowl. Pour over the dressing and add the croutons and Parmesan. Coat the leaves in the dressing, then serve by placing the leaves with their thin edge out in a circle and put the salad in the middle of the table for people to eat with their fingers.

Serves 4

6 tablespoons olive oil,
plus a little extra for frying
1 large garlic clove, peeled
1 large free-range egg
1 tablespoon lemon juice
2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
freshly ground black pepper
1 Romaine lettuce, washed and
the leaves carefully removed,
leaving whole and long
2 thick slices of white bread,
crusts removed, cubed
25g Parmesan cheese, coarsely
grated



right The Waldorf=Astoria in its original 34th Street and 5th Avenue Location.

Waldorf Salad

There's no doubt that New York is one of the most incredible cities in the world, full of ruthless ambition and endless excitement. If you want it and you can pay for it, then you can have it. There is no dish that better typifies the New York spirit than the Waldorf Salad. Cole Porter knew it and immortalised it in his song 'You're the Top': his lyrics put the salad on a par with the Mona Lisa, the Tower of Pisa and Greta Garbo's salary. It's just a mixture of mayonnaise, celery and apple on a bed of lettuce, but it is a perfect balance of sweet and sharp with soft and bitter. The Waldorf is a salad that is definitely bad for you but makes you feel good, just like New York.

The Waldorf=Astoria Hotel was born out of conflict. The 13-storey Waldorf half was built in 1893 by the richest man in America, William Waldorf Astor, on the site of his former residence. It also happened to be next door to his aunt, the wonderfully named Caroline Webster Schermerhorn

Astor, with whom he had been feuding for some time: Caroline believed that she should have sole use of the name 'Mrs Astor', while William maintained that his wife was entitled to use it too. This was an important matter in the world of the affluent American socialite.

The erection of a sun-blocking building did nothing to appease Caroline and four years later her son, William's cousin John Jacob Astor IV, persuaded her to move away. He then built the Astoria Hotel on the adjoining block to the Waldorf, and made it four storeys higher. Although originally separate, the two were soon connected by some clever architecture and the now famous double-hyphen. This both emphasised the equality between the two buildings and visually represented the small alleyway that separated them on the ground.

The Waldorf and later the Waldorf=Astoria changed the way hotels function. No longer were they merely for transient people looking for somewhere to rest their heads; now they would be magnets for the rich and powerful who wanted to enjoy themselves. The Waldorf=Astoria's glamorous



right The Palm Garden Restaurant inside the Waldorf=Astoria Hotel, c.1902.

bars and sophisticated restaurants were soon full of New York's A-listers, most with the surname Astor or Vanderbilt or, failing that, invited by them. The hotel was also the last word in service and attention to detail. From the day the Waldorf opened its doors it provided room service – the first hotel to do so. Imagine, if you had never heard of the idea before, the sheer joy of being able to eat food at any hour of the night without leaving your room! It also contained within its walls an inner sanctum, a hotel within a hotel. These Waldorf Towers were a highly exclusive collection of rooms which played host to some of the most powerful and famous people in America. Residents ranged from the inventor Nikola Tesla through to the notorious New York gangster Bugsy Siegel.

The driving force behind many of these innovations and the creator of the salad that bears part of the hotel's name was the maitre d', Oscar Tschirky. Oscar was on board from the opening of the Waldorf and in charge of the planning and the pre-opening parties. In those days the maitre

d' had many culinary jobs to do, including boning fish tableside and preparing fresh salads, and the flamboyant Oscar knew that the hotel needed some signature dishes to make it stand out. He saw the chance to put together a few of his favourite things, mayonnaise, apple and celery, and he served them on small lettuce leaves so they looked glamorous and tasty. He unleashed his salad on 1,500 New York socialites, press and celebrities just a week before the official opening and overnight it became the talk of the town. It has never left the hotel menu since – and today if you order it from room service it contains truffles!

Oscar was a passionate foodie and an avid collector of menus and recipes. In 1896 he published his own cookbook, simply entitled *The Cookbook*. Its success enabled people across the country – and the world – to replicate the salad that had swept New York.

Oscar's original version didn't contain walnuts; that change may have been the brainchild of George Rector, a successful restaurateur in the 1920s at an eatery named after himself. He featured a walnut-including version in his *Rector Cook Book* in 1928. These days you may see anything from grapefruit to cauliflower included in a Waldorf Salad – my version, like many others, includes grapes – but Oscar Tschirsky's original dish still has the power to conjure up an image of high-class hotel living.

left Cole Porter immortalised the Waldorf Salad in his song 'You're the Top'.



above An original Waldorf=Astoria luggage tag.



above The foyer of the Waldorf=Astoria Hotel was luxurious and inviting.

WALDORF SALAD

‘Peel two raw apples and cut them into small pieces, say about half an inch square, also cut some celery the same way, and mix it with the apple. Be very careful not to let any seeds of the apples be mixed with it. The salad must be dressed with a good mayonnaise.’

The original recipe, from

The Cookbook by Oscar of the Waldorf, 1896

Put the chopped celery in a bowl with the walnuts.

To make the dressing, crush the garlic in a pestle and mortar with the sea salt. Mix the mayonnaise and the yogurt together and add to the mortar and mix. Add this to the celery and walnuts.

Now add the chopped chervil to the dressing along with the apple. Toss everything together, ensuring that the dressing has coated all the ingredients and season with pepper. Serve on the lettuce leaves and garnish with the grapes.

Serves 4

4 medium-sized celery sticks,
chopped into approx. 1cm pieces
50g walnut halves, roughly chopped
2 teaspoons freshly chopped chervil
freshly ground black pepper, to taste
2 Granny Smith apples, peeled and
diced into 1cm pieces (make sure
no pips sneak in as they are very
bitter indeed)
a handful of crunchy lettuce leaves
85g seedless black or white grapes,
halved

FOR THE DRESSING

1 garlic clove
½ teaspoon sea salt
3 tablespoons mayonnaise
1 heaped dessertspoon natural yogurt



Salad Olivier

If there is one dish that unites a much-divided Eastern Europe it is this rich but luxurious mixture of game and crayfish lightened with a piquant mayonnaise. It is the national dish in at least four countries including Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia; most places east of Poland serve it at New Year and at many other celebrations. It makes a stunning centrepiece to any buffet and the story of its creation and subsequent rise to culinary classic status might have come straight out of a Russian spy novel.

By 1860 the Russian dining classes had been in love with all things French for some time. French chefs were employed in any aristocratic household worth its salt. However, life in Russia is much colder than in France and involves a lot more vodka, so flavours have to be big and bold. One chef who understood this was Belgian-born Lucien Olivier, who in 1864 opened a restaurant called the Hermitage in Moscow.

The Hermitage served Russian dishes with a classical French influence. Sauces were refined and rich, but the gamey meats and dried fish were local and very Russian. As a way to use up ingredients,



above Moscow in 1860 – a city of Francophiles.

Olivier invented a salad but, as the Hermitage was a fine-dining restaurant, it had to be decadent and decorated with caviar as a final flourish.

The recipe was a closely guarded secret: Olivier would retire to his own area to prepare the *mise en place* and to make the dressing. As far as we can tell it consisted of black caviar and capers, layered with steamed chicken and held together with a set broth made from the bird's carcass. Crayfish and pieces of beef tongue were arranged around the edges of the dish and it was dressed with an emulsion of olive oil, egg yolks, French vinegar, mustard and spices. A potato skin filled with gherkins and chopped boiled egg decorated the centre of the dish.

The restaurant and the dish were a huge success. For the first time Moscow had an eatery as fine as anything in Paris. But other chefs regarded Olivier's good fortune with envious eyes and even among his own employees there were those willing to stab him in the back. The waiting staff were not given wages but relied purely on tips; if they were to get their hands on the golden goose of a recipe they could make a pretty penny. So when on one busy night around 1880 Olivier was called away from his prep to deal with a culinary emergency, a sous chef by the name of Ivan Ivanov saw his chance, dashed into the boss's work area and rapidly made a note of everything he could see.

Ivanov immediately left the Hermitage and got a job at a restaurant called Moskva, where he served



above Tsar Alexander II, a member of the Russian royal family and a great employer of French chefs.

something he called 'Capital Salad'. Olivier's recipe was finally out there. Despite critics damning it as inferior, Ivanov was able to get it published and earn himself some money. Very soon variations were appearing in every restaurant in Russia. Olivier himself died in 1883 and his family left the country after the 1905 revolution, leaving other chefs free to sell their versions of the dish as Salad Olivier. In a final twist to the story of this secretive man, his tomb was discovered only in 2008, hidden away in the German cemetery in Moscow. Rumour has it that his recipe book was buried alongside him.

Changing economic conditions meant that food had to change too. Caviar and game were not on most people's menus and Salad Olivier became a catch-all name for most Russian salads. When many Russians left the country in 1917 they set about redefining the salad's ingredients in their new homes: an Iranian version includes chicken, gherkins and carrots, a Turkish one sliced cucumber pickles and a Polish one potatoes, carrots, onions dill pickles and apples but no meat.

After World War II Russian communities all over the globe began to look to the dishes of their

past to use at times of celebration and Salad Olivier became the centrepiece to many. These days it is as important to New Year as the turkey is to Thanksgiving in the United States. In Britain memories of Russian salad were scarred a little by the tinned variety in the 1970s, but my advice is to forget what the school dinner ladies called Russian Salad, get stuck in to this rich combination of flavours and transport yourself back to nineteenth-century Moscow. You can include herring roe instead of the caviar if you really want to go the full nine yards – and why wouldn't you? Overleaf is my version of the salad, which is much more accessible than Olivier's original, but no less delicious.



above a trip to Denmark in 1864. Salad Olivier was often served at royal parties.

SALAD OLIVIER

Serves 4–6

2 large chicken breasts, on the bone with the skin on	a handful of finely chopped tarragon
1 bay leaf	2 tablespoons olive oil (Spanish if you can get it)
6 peppercorns	10–12 cornichons
1 onion, chopped into chunks	a handful of finely chopped parsley
1 potato	2 hard-boiled eggs
125g full-fat mayonnaise	100g small prawns, cooked
75g natural yogurt	12 white endive leaves
2 teaspoons Dijon mustard	Sevruga caviar, to taste
juice of 1 lime	
1 tablespoon white wine vinegar	

Using chicken breasts on the bone with the skin on helps keep the moisture in the meat and give the dish a fuller flavour. It really needs the sharpness of the mustard and cornichons to cut through all the mayonnaise so try to keep the flavours balanced and taste as you go to stop the salad becoming too heavy.

Poach the chicken in about 200ml water along with the bay leaf, peppercorns and onion for about 40 minutes until the chicken is very soft. Leave it to cool in the water. Remove the skin and pull the meat from the bone. Chop the meat into small cubes.

Meanwhile, boil the potato in a saucepan of water until just tender, ensuring that it does not go completely soft. Leave it to cool and chop into cubes.

Mix together the mayonnaise, yogurt, mustard and lime juice. Add the vinegar little by little, checking the flavour to stop it becoming overpowering. Add the tarragon and the oil and mix well.

Chop the cornichons into very small pieces and add them to the mayonnaise along with the chicken, potato and the parsley. Mix well – it's fine if the potato breaks up a little. If the mixture seems a bit thick then add a little of the poaching liquid from the chicken to loosen it up.

Finally chop the eggs and fold through the mixture along with the prawns. Tip the mixture into a shallow bowl, top with the caviar and put the endive leaves around the edge so people can eat from the leaf if they wish.



Melba Toast

Often the simplest things in life are the work of the greatest minds: it takes immense talent and bravado to strip back the creative process and present a product without elaborate garnishes, knowing that it is perfect for the occasion. Nowhere is that truer than of Melba Toast. It's not just toast, it's perfect toast! Its curly, crunchy brittleness is the ideal foil for anything from a scoop of cream cheese to a rich brandy-fuelled pâté. Its seductive curve is always an exciting indicator of tasty things to come. If someone has made the effort to make Melba Toast as a starter, what follows will surely be a delight.

Melba Toast was created just over a century ago, in 1897, when the great Auguste Escoffier was at the height of his powers at the Savoy Hotel in London. The food he served to the great and good was hailed as the best in the world. The Savoy was the hotel of choice for royalty, business tycoons and, most memorably, celebrities. Celebrity culture may have reached its zenith in our own century, but it has always existed. As soon as humans invented shows, show business was the natural by-product.



left In 1897 the Savoy Hotel was one of the grandest hotels in the world.



above The Savoy Hotel, the place for glamorous, affluent people.

It catapulted its stars into the public eye. Back in 1897, for the culture-rich Londoner, there was no bigger star than the Australian songstress Dame Nellie Melba. She was often in England and enjoyed staying at the Savoy. She and Escoffier became well acquainted – she liked his food and he liked his food, a perfect basis for any friendship. Her appreciation of his talents had already seen him create the stunning Peach Melba dessert in her honour (see page 144) and she was always able to turn to the great chef to find something to suit her tastes and needs.

On this particular trip, though, Nellie was feeling unwell. She retired to her room, sending down a request to the kitchen for some plain toast, something dry and without much flavour. Now asking one of the greatest chefs in the world to make you some toast is akin to asking Caravaggio to give your bedroom walls a lick of paint – the chances are he is going to over-deliver.

One can only imagine the scene in the kitchen. Escoffier placing the slices of bread under his grill and watching as their outsides turn slowly golden. Then removing them and examining them, deciding

Who put the Beef in Wellington?



above Victorian London was a vibrant bustling city.

they are not crispy enough. A sharp blade slices the toast down the middle; the now pale side is put back under the flame. The great man smiles a little as the corners begin to curl slightly, their texture perfect for his operatic guest's weary digestive system. Escoffier sent the toast up. It never came back. It became a staple of Nellie's diet during her recuperation and on future visits.

There is, of course, an alternative version which has the toast being made by a bungling young waiter. It drew gasps of horror from the hotel owner, César Ritz, but before he could apologise the Dame had declared, 'I have never eaten such lovely toast.' Melba Toast made it all the way on to the Savoy Grill menu, served with pâtés and cheese, and remained there for over a hundred years.

To understand how these humble crisp breads took on a life beyond London's West End, you need to look to our increasing obsession with body shape and diet. In the 1920s the Mayo medical clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, well known for its innovative techniques, was asked by the actress Ethel Barrymore to help her lose weight. Barrymore was one of the great stars of the silent movie era,

but she was now in her forties and she wanted to remain a star. The 18-day diet the Mayo created for her relied heavily on Melba's little crispy toasts. Celebrity culture in 1920s America was much more evolved than it had been in Britain in the 1890s and American housewives spent long days under the hairdryer devouring every details of the lives of the rich and famous. Word of this 'miracle toast' soon spread and suddenly it was everywhere, as satisfying as toast but with half the calories.

It didn't take long for a couple of successful bakers, Harry and Sophie Cubbison, to work out how to mass-produce the toast, package it and get it on to the supermarket shelves. Their company, Mrs Cubbison's Foods, still exists today, largely thanks to Melba Toast and its use in stuffing and other coatings.

Incidentally, Ethel Barrymore went on to enjoy a long and productive career in the talking-picture business, but I leave it to you to decide if Melba Toast was responsible.

below Hollywood starlet Ethel Barrymore used Melba Toast as part of her diet plan.



Who put the Beef in Wellington?



right London c1900
showing Covent Garden
Market near the Opera
House where Dame Nellie
Melba performed.

MELBA TOAST

Melba toast is one of those dishes that is brilliantly ingenious to make. It is so simple but serve it to friends with rustic duck rillettes or a smooth chicken liver pâté and they are going to be impressed. Pâté is most certainly not on any 18-day calorie controlled diet, but who cares!

Place the slice of bread under the grill and toast for a couple of minutes until lightly golden on both sides.

Remove from the grill and splice the slice with a sharp knife and return to the grill, uncooked side up. Watch carefully and remove when golden.

Serve with the pâté of your choice.

Makes 2

1 slice of bread



right Auguste Escoffier,
creator of so many
fabulous culinary delights,
including Melba Toast.

Who put the Beef in Wellington?



Eggs Benedict

There is something utterly desirable about a dish that can work just as well as a breakfast, a lunch or a late-night snack. The combination of soft, rich egg and salty-sweet ham sitting on a crisp, forgiving muffin with a lick of silky-smooth hollandaise hanging over it is the work of a master, much like a Van Gogh sunflower or a Renoir umbrella. It is fitting that the story of a dish that can be enjoyed at any time of day should begin in the 24-hour city, the city that never sleeps: New York.

The year was 1890-something; Manhattan was a thriving, bustling island. Wall Street was emerging as the smart road to work on. Guys called John D Rockefeller and J P Morgan had set up shop and people were trading shares daily, while a man named Charles Dow (later to hook up with Edward Davis Jones and become synonymous with the New York Stock Exchange) kept track of the dozen or so stocks in his reports. This was a time of furious creation.

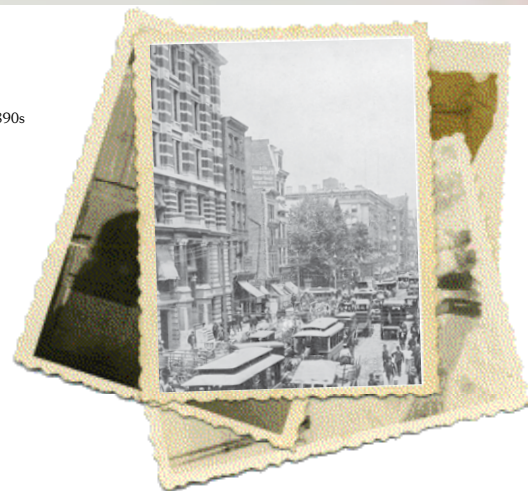
Just two blocks south from Wall Street was Delmonico's, a restaurant as ritzy as New York could get. In charge of the kitchen was a Frenchman called Charles Ranhofer, but he was no run-of-the-mill French chef: he'd been sent to Paris aged 12 to study pastry and by 16 he was running a kitchen for Charles d'Hénin, the Count of Alsace, at his ancestral home of Château Bourlémont in Lorraine. By 20 he was cooking in New York for the Russian consul and in 1862, still only 26, he

was in charge of Delmonico's.

Ranhofer liked to invent and New York was the perfect playground. He was able to combine classic French techniques with New World pizzazz to draw a heady crowd, including the likes of Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde. Ranhofer liked to name new dishes after his favourite diners and had already been responsible for Lobster Duke Alexis (a rich bisque made for the Russian Emperor), veal pie à la Dickens (yes, that Dickens) and a pistachio-crust chicken dish named after French President Sadi Carnot. He's credited with making Baked Alaska the dish it is today (see page 136) and we'll hear about another of his innovations when we come to Lobster Thermidor on page 96. The man was the Heston Blumenthal of his day, the perfect combination of showmanship and technique. He also loved a challenge.

One particular day around 1890 the challenge was set him by a Delmonico's regular, a

right New York in the 1890s
– the place to be.



stockbroker called LeGrand Lockwood Benedict. Having done a few deals in the morning, LeGrand settled down to lunch with his wife Sarah. It is now that the story gets hazy. Some say it was LeGrand himself who asked Ranhofer to show him something new, others that it was Sarah who, with the maitre d', discussed a concoction of poached eggs, hollandaise, ham and bread. This latter version was described in a letter to *The New York Times* magazine in 1967 by a Mabel C Butler, who claimed to be related to Sarah Benedict. Mabel was contradicting an article by the paper's food expert Craig Claiborne, which reported that the dish was first made by a Commodore E C Benedict while living in France. To this day descendants of both Benedict families claim the legacy.

In yet another variant, the inspiration is a New York stockbroker called Lemuel Benedict, alleged to have been served the eggs in the Waldorf Hotel some years later (1894) when he walked in demanding a hangover cure.

Whatever the truth may be, in 1894 Ranhofer published his great work, *The Epicurean*, and



above Downtown New York at
the turn of the twentieth century.

included a recipe for Eggs à la Benedick [sic]. In so doing he effectively claimed the dish as his own creation. Two years later it appeared in Fannie Farmer's revised edition of the bestselling *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*. While inclusion in Ranhofer's book put the dish firmly on the road to international culinary fame, Farmer's endorsement meant that it reached nearly every housewife in the country. At some point it even attained the status of having its own special day – in the United States 16 April is National Eggs Benedict Day.

The dish's popularity – at any time of the day and with or without a hangover – has led to copy after copy. Variations range from Eggs Florentine (with the addition of spinach) through Eggs Provençale (the hollandaise is replaced by béarnaise sauce) to Artichoke Benedict (the eggs nest on the leaves of a globe artichoke rather than a muffin). The Irish even have a version which includes corned beef.



left Charles Ranhofer, head chef at
Delmonico's restaurant, New York
City c1898.

right Delmonico's restaurant on 5th Avenue, New York City, 1924.



EGGS BENEDICT

‘Cut some muffins into halves crosswise, toast them without allowing to brown, then place a round of cooked ham an eighth of an inch thick and of the same diameter as the muffins one each half. Heat in a moderate oven and put a poached egg on each toast. Cover the whole with Hollandaise sauce.’

Eggs á la Benedict,
from *The Epicurean* by Charles Ranhofer, 1894

To make the hollandaise sauce, put the vinegar in a small saucepan with the peppercorns and bay leaf. Reduce the vinegar over a high heat until there is only 1 tablespoon left. Strain the liquid, removing the peppercorns and the bay leaf. Put the egg yolks in a food processor with the vinegar reduction. Gently melt the butter in a saucepan over a medium heat so that the butter solids fall to the bottom of the pan. Turn the food processor on and slowly pour the butter on to the egg yolks with the motor still running. The sauce will start to thicken. When only the butter solids are left, stop. If the sauce is too thick, add a little hot water. Season to taste with salt and pepper and a little lemon juice.

Bring a deep saucepan containing at least 2 litres of water to the boil and add the vinegar. Break the eggs into four separate cups or ramekins. Slice the muffins and toast. Briskly swirl the water until it forms a vortex and carefully add an egg. It will curl round and set to a neat circle. Cook for 2–3 minutes, then remove with a slotted spoon. Repeat with the other eggs, one at a time, re-whisking the water as you add the eggs. Spread some hollandaise sauce over each muffin, place a slice of ham on top and finish with a poached egg. Spoon over the remaining hollandaise and serve.

Serves 4–6

3 tablespoons white wine vinegar
4 large free-range eggs
2 English muffins
4 slices of Serrano or Bayonne ham

FOR THE HOLLANDAISE

3 tablespoons white wine vinegar
6 peppercorns
1 bay leaf
2 egg yolks
125g butter
salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
lemon juice, to taste