Billionaire’s Picnic

ALEXANDRA LEAF

Notice of the upcoming sale at Christie’s appeared last December in the New York Times: the contents of media investor and philanthropist John W. Kluge’s Morven estate were to be put up at auction by the University of Virginia. In 2001 the school had received his extraordinary gift of a 7,379-acre property valued at over fifty million dollars. Nearly five years later, the time had come to sell off the artwork and antiques in the historic main manor house, including the world’s largest picnic hamper—an affair on wheels manufactured by Asprey of London. Commissioned by Kluge in 1987, the half-ton picnic “wagon” was designed to hook to the back of a tractor for plein air luncheons on the billionaire’s sprawling Albemarle County estate.

The colossal rig consisted of two main parts—an iron truck bed with towing post painted a deep red burgundy and a massive wicker and brass “container” sitting atop it. The container housed eight large hinged English wicker baskets (with brass carrying handles), each of which contained an assortment of smaller wicker baskets made to hold glassware, cutlery, china, serving implements, bar items, and spares. The picnic set also comprised two six-foot-long mahogany folding tables with sixteen matching monogrammed folding chairs.

A burgundy embossed leather manual (courtesy of Asprey) with specifications and instructions for use accompanied the rig. Several pages of hand-drawn diagrams detailed the placement of the hot-cold boxes, the water pump, and the four twelve-volt batteries that powered the hamper. This deluxe owner’s manual also contained a complete inventory of the hamper’s contents.
The Flatware
An Elizabeth II Silver Table Service
Mark of Asprey, London, 1987
Irish rib pattern, engraved, comprising:
Twenty-three table forks
Thirty-five dessert forks
Twenty-one soup spoons
Thirty-four teaspoons
Two soup ladles
Two stuffing spoons
Four smaller stuffing spoons
Four meat forks
Four sauce ladles
Two pairs of serving forks and spoons
Four pierced lifters, each marked on handle
A Staghorn-handled Part Table and Bar Service
Asprey, twentieth century

The Table Service Comprising:
Twenty-three steak knives
Twenty-four dinner knives
Twenty-three butter spreaders
Twenty-four cheese knives
Four lunch forks
Three lunch knives
Two carving knives
A knife sharpener
The bar service: three pairs of ice tongs, two lemon knives, three various bottle openers, a corkscrew

Drinking Cups
A set of sixteen Elizabeth II Horn and Silver Cups
Asprey, Birmingham, 1987
With rope twist base and silver mounts, the body applied with initial K, each marked under base. 4 ½ in. high

The Stemware
A Baccarat Part Stemware Service, Twentieth century
In the “Annie” pattern with knobbed stem and gilt rims comprising:
Seventeen red wines
Seventeen white wines
Twenty-three high balls
Twenty-two low balls

The Porcelain Service
A Bernardaud (Limoges) Porcelain Dinner Service
Retailed by Asprey & Co.
Monogram K with gun and bird armorial, gilt borders with cream ground, comprising:
Twenty-four dinner plates (10-inch diameter)
Twenty-six salad plates
Twenty-four bowls
Twenty-two coffee cups and nineteen fruit saucers
A creamer
Two covered sugar bowls

Kluge’s picnic hamper was estimated to fetch between twenty and thirty thousand dollars, a figure that seemed simultaneously reasonable and unreasonable. How could one price a unique and uniquely over-the-top set like this in the first place? Surely the sum was greater than its parts—or was it? Who would or could buy such an extraordinary hamper anyway?

I called Christie’s the Monday after the article appeared in the paper. Yes, indeed, the hamper was on view, and I was welcome to come and see it. The day of my visit, it happened that the truck bed (minus all of the accoutrements, of course) had been wheeled out and set in the center of the auction house courtyard on West Forty-ninth Street. Sitting opposite the famed Rainbow Room, with its neon signage, in the midst of the Rockefeller Center holiday shopper bustle, the rig looked very much out of place.

After inquiring about the whereabouts of Lot 455, I was directed to a large room where the hamper contents were on display. One of the mahogany tables, flanked by eight of the folding chairs, had been set up as if for a luncheon. The large swirly K with its crest-like hunting imagery on the porcelain table service conveyed both power and nostalgia. A number of the hampers were set out on the floor, the larger ones the size of small refrigerators. The flatware and serving utensils, along with the horn and silver cups, were displayed in tall glass cases. I decided to attend the auction.

I arrived early on the designated day. This time I was directed to a room upstairs, where the auction was already in full swing. I sat down and waited for the countdown; there were over one hundred lots to go before the Asprey Hamper came up. After a change in auctioneers, a fair amount of nineteenth-century American and English furniture, small sculptures, and much excitement over a group of equestrian-themed paintings, Lot 455 appeared on the screen. The bidding was brisker and the competition greater than I think anyone had imagined.

There was no activity from the floor but a great deal from telephone bidders. I felt as though I were watching a tennis match as the auctioneer directed the bidding. “On my left, no now it’s mine, on the right, still on my right and now on my left.” Within seconds, it seemed, the bid, which had opened at twenty thousand dollars, had climbed past one hundred thousand. When all was said and done, the Asprey Picnic Hamper had gone to an undisclosed telephone bidder for $144,000.00, including taxes and fees.

My adventure with Kluge’s picnic set had come to an end. The new owner would remain anonymous, so I can’t discover the hamper’s whereabouts. Which privileged few will now sip vintage champagne from those elegant flutes?
A Futurist Feast
SARAH HACK

Apart from celebrated and legendary exceptions, until now men have fed themselves like ants, rats, cats or oxen. Now with the futurists the first human way of eating is born. We mean the art of self-nourishment.

—F.T. Marinetti, 1933

One Saturday night last March at Williams College, the future was no longer a thing of the past. For neither profit nor course credit, renegade college seniors Ben Brown, Jacob King, and Ward Schaefer, along with a team of student cohorts and Williams College Dining Services, led one hundred guests on a ten-course gastronomic adventure that reimagined the first futurist banquet, held seventy-five years ago in Turin, Italy. It was both a sensory assault and a consummately glamorous affair.

Futurists, part of the early twentieth-century Italian avant-garde, were anti-past and anti-pasta; they were philosophers, painters, poets, architects, and pranksters with a utopian vision of the future. In the kitchen they were scientists of shock. F.T. Marinetti, futurism’s founder, published La cocina futurista in 1933 with the painter Lugi Colombo Fillìa. This cookbook cum guidebook rejected all things staid, status quo, and carbohydrate. Down with the Italian dietary staple pastasciutta! Eating, according to Marinetti, was about painting, rather than filling, the stomach.

At our futurist re-creation first came coat check, cocktails, and hors d’oeuvres. Servers circulated with platters of white chocolate discs topped with dollops of caviar as guests congregated around a pedestal, helping themselves to cubes of translucent, briny aspic—“Virtual Food,” according to our menu. Contemplating the grid of gelatin refracting the light of a video projected from below, a fellow student whispered to me: “This is so Orwellian—‘here’s crap and there’s something good, enjoy!’” As I sipped my Devil in Black Key, a cocktail of chocolate sauce, hard-boiled egg yolk, and Prosecco, I became slightly apprehensive about the meal to come. Would sensation trump satiation?

“Some of these dishes will challenge your palate!” This ceremonious introduction to the meal was a vast understatement. Highlights from the menu include Aerofood—a dish of raw fennel, black olives, and a single
kumquat, which we ate with one hand while stroking a texture strip of silk, velvet, and sandpaper with the other, as servers showered us with rosewater. We nibbled on Italian Sea—skewers of bananas, maraschino cherries, figs, and octopus served with a tomato and spinach sauce atop a fishbowl containing live fish—and delighted in Nicotine Dee-Light, a tobacco-infused ice cream doused with coffee sauce by servers now wielding syringes.

The evening was punctuated by ear-piercing whistles that beckoned the servers from the kitchen; megaphone announcements describing the appropriate modes of consumption; video and musical interludes on four simultaneous projection screens; and a culinary history lesson from one of the banquet’s honorary guests, Fabio Parasecoli of NYU and Gambero Rosso magazine. Parasecoli situated futurist culinary ideology within the contemporary context, drawing comparisons between futurist cooking and its realization today by the likes of Catalan chef and molecular gastronomist Ferran Adrià.

Each dish at our banquet was, surprisingly, more edible than the last, except for Sunshine Soup—a bowl of Gatorade, cheese puffs, and glow sticks. “It’s a purely visual course...even though some of you are eating it,” announced Ben Brown, a little belatedly. And the Bread of Life was performance, not sustenance: servers delicately extracted strands of DNA from beakers of red cabbage reduction before passing the beakers around for diners to try their hand at extraction.

Misconceptions and cryptic publicity preceded the event (posters read simply “The Future is Coming!”), as did threatening messages to the diners (“If you can’t stay for the entire banquet, we ask that you not come at all!”). As in a Milgram-style obedience experiment, a vegetarian in attendance succumbed to the pressure to stuff herself with meat for the Survival of the Fittest eating competition.

Luckily, the futurist incarnates I met at Williams were far from Fascist. As our academic advisor, Darra Goldstein, noted, the banquet was not just a historical re-creation but a twenty-first-century take that incorporated current technology and new American ideas. According to Jacob King, one of the banquet’s chief organizers, the aims of the event were “deliberately ambiguous,” intended to provoke meditation on avant-garde ideology. “Are we mocking the futurists’ naive idealism and military-industrial aesthetic, or celebrating their faith in art and their dynamic, shocking creativity?” he asked. Not surprisingly, he refused to answer his own question.

Although we know that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, our banquet was thoroughly eroticized, with an abundance of phallic symbols. After I had
consumed my third upright sausage and watched a group of girls (and one guy) blow a trumpet while chewing meat. I began to shudder at the chauvinistic strains in Marinetti’s philosophy. Even so, food tastes better when all of your senses are engaged.

La Musée Escoffier de l’Art Culinaire, Villeneuve-Loubet, France
Kara S. Nielsen

What felt like a pilgrimage was really just a visit to the tiny Provençal town of Villeneuve-Loubet. After a long train ride, a city bus, and a few false starts, I finally arrived at the newly refurbished Musée Escoffier de l’Art Culinaire, located in the former Escoffier family home, a salmon pink three-story house with bright blue shutters and a pair of fluttering flags.

As I crossed the stone threshold, great anticipation swept over me. How would French culinary history be presented here, in the natal home of a man credited with codifying late nineteenth-century French cooking for practically the next hundred years? What treasures would I find? And what lessons would I learn?

I turned out to be the only visitor in the museum, and its hush contributed to my feeling of reverence as I followed the self-guided tour through three floors of themed rooms. This churchlike atmosphere was tempered by the museum’s ruddy tile floor and cheery butter-colored walls, reminding me I was still in Provence.

The collection itself vacillated between culinary antiques and Escoffier memorabilia. Antique highlights included a large fireplace filled with earthy cooking accessories and an elaborate tournebroche, or turnspit. I was impressed with the collection of polished copper molds, their workmanship and heft readily apparent, evoking a long-gone era when craftsmanship and durability, as well as design, were important values for cooking equipment. Already I had found a few treasures!

The next highlight was Le Potager Provençal, a substantial red-tiled wood-burning stove covered with rustic pottery pitchers and pots. Old cleavers, tarnished metal spoons, and a rusty eggbeater were suspended above. A very low kneading table with handy flour bins underneath attested to the diminutive stature of past cooks. Seemingly prehistoric utensils littered the table: larding needles, a beignet iron, hand-cranked spice mills, and grinders. I thought about the hard manual labor required before electric appliances came into use and bowed my head in appreciation.

Other rooms exhibited personal effects that traced Escoffier’s own history more than France’s. Le Salon d’Auguste Escoffier paid homage to important figures in Escoffier’s life, such as his predecessor Chef Marie-Antoinin Carême and the famous opera singer Nellie Melba. Le Bureau d’Auguste Escoffier displayed a manuscript of his masterwork, Ma cuisine, as well as family photos and medals. Escoffier dans le monde attested to the chef’s wide-reaching influence around the world. The most informative historical elements were the menu collection on the top floor and the wall-sized timeline of culinary history in the basement—an unexpected subterranean treat.

While savoring the glory of this esteemed chef and admiring the fine tools of the past, I was struck by other historical realities. Where were the women in the numerous photos of toque-topped cooks posing with the master chef, or in those of tuxedo-clad male diners assembled for various banquets? Certainly not in the commercial kitchens or fine dining rooms of the era.

I gleaned a deeper truth from the lithographs and cartoons depicting cooks at work, wearing forlorn expressions while plucking fowl, surrounded by animal carcasses, sniffing dogs, and empty oyster shells. Here cooks were mocked, depicted drunk or dirty and dressed in tatters. The cook as lowly servant: how could I have forgotten? Despite this museum dedicated to promoting the glory of one cook who rose above the others, who led them in organized brigades and wrote a bible for them to follow, Escoffier, by dint of cooking for a living, remained a servant just like his forebears. Many years would pass before chefs would be able to extricate themselves from the kitchen, a phenomenon that occurred only in the late 1970s, thanks to Paul Bocuse’s savvy example and the onslaught of nouvelle cuisine.

Perhaps, the ultimate lesson of the day was realizing how much the cooking profession has evolved over the last century. Cooking has become easier, more inclusive, and more professional. Now there is a lesson worth learning.

Correction
In the Spring 2006 Bookshelf, the publisher of Susanne Freidberg’s French Beans and Food Scares was incorrectly named as St. Martin’s Press. The publisher is Oxford University Press. We regret the error.