Reflections on the Fancy Third
British Catering in the 1970s

Our entry into most areas of personal freedom is heralded by some social recognition—the legal drinking age; the keys to the car; voting rights; our first wage packet—but growing up into food choice happens without much fanfare. We go from eating what we’re given, to choosing what we eat, in a profoundly private epiphany. It’s a different point for each of us, and very few people notice when they cross that line.

For me, though, it was a landmark. When I was eleven my parents moved from a suburban home—where the family ate whatever my mother cooked—to a twenty-four-bedroom hotel. Suddenly we had a chef and kitchen staff. There was a dining room with four waitresses who served three meals a day. Cupboards full of silver teapots, toast racks, and butter dishes represented breakfast, while lunch and dinner came with their own crockery and cutlery services: fish knives, napkin rings, coupes, steak plates, and sundae dishes. It should have been a paradise of choice.

But when you live in a hotel, it doesn’t work like that. We ate leftovers. Okay, they were very good leftovers, but still, we only got what hadn’t been chosen by the guests. It made for some interesting dinners—Mulligatawny soup, Dover sole, and Black Forest gateau one day; Prawn Cocktail, lamb chops, and rice pudding the next. It was like the torments of Tantalus.

Every day I would watch my mother prepare the dinner menus that were presented to the guests in red leatherette folders. I would fold napkins and polish silverware, fill water jugs and arrange bread rolls in wicker baskets, all the time wondering what would be popular, because whatever was unpopular would be my supper. This turned me into an expert on what other people would choose to eat. Chicken was more popular than pork, and steak sold out early, leaving disgruntled late arrivals to choose between the salad dish and whatever “fancy third” we had on the menu. A “fancy third” was a posh name for leftovers—if the roast beef hadn’t sold out the previous day, then the fancy third was Spaghetti Bolognaise. If we had been left with lots of cod, then the fancy third was Fisherman’s Pie. A fancy third was always something chopped up or minced down and served with a blanket of sauce. It was doubly disappointing to sit down with the waitresses, my parents and brother, and the kitchen staff after all the guests had been served, and find we were about to eat a fancy third.

This was when I discovered the hollow beauty of restaurant nomenclature. Crème Caramel sounded like a pudding from the Arabian Nights; it had its own little glass dishes in which it was made upside down and then tipped onto a flat plate so the rich coffee-colored sauce could pool around its creamy molded shape—a kind of alchemy in the form of dessert. Sadly, it tasted like baby food and burnt toast and had the slippery consistency of something that youths might hawk up in the street and spit on the pavement. Florida Cocktail was resonant of sunshine, pelicans, and faraway places—until I realized it was grapefruit segments and mandarin slices poured from giant tins and mixed in a bowl before being slopped into tall glasses and topped with a glacé cherry that had the vague flavor of cough medicine.

Like most girls of my age in a seaside resort, I became a waitress and observed food choices at first hand. “Who on earth,” I asked the chef, as I handed through a diner’s orders, “wants to eat soup, a fancy third, and crème caramel?”

“Somebody with dentures,” he replied.

It was my first glimmer of the fact that food choices could be the result of necessity, not personal taste. I discovered that a range of imperatives operated on people presented with a menu. Men ate porridge and kippers for breakfast. Women chose cereal and grapefruit halves. Men liked pâté, steak, and curry (which had to contain raisins, or it wasn’t a ‘real’ curry in 1970s Britain), while their wives opted for egg mayonnaise salad, followed by chicken or fish. While men liked desserts that had substance—rice pudding and pies with cream—women would always say, “Well, I’ve only had a light main course,” which statement allowed them to opt...
for whichever sweet contained chocolate or was decorated with berries or both.

Novelty was a problem to be negotiated. The first time we served avocado vinaigrette, it was eaten only by those who had been abroad and encountered this vegetable rarity there, but within a week, stay-at-home types, who had observed their more adventurous counterparts handling the green conundrum, were willing to dip a teaspoon into its gelid mystery. They were on holiday, and unfamiliar food was like a kiss-me-quick-hat or a saucy postcard, something to approach with bravado, but strictly limited to this annual fortnight of unusual experiences. When they went home, they returned to a diet that contained no surprises at all. Like sunburn or open-topped buses, food choice was a risky but potentially rewarding process that was confined to holiday periods.

While the guests were presented with a new menu during each day of their fortnight, we experienced food differently, because the dishes came around every fourteen days. We might have schnitzel once in a while, if veal was cheap, or apple pie might replace strawberry cheesecake if the chef felt like it, but we could usually guess which day it was—not by looking at the calendar, but by what we smelled on waking. Nobody could mistake the hearty aroma of first Monday’s oxtail soup, while second Monday was reserved for the vegetable fragrance of leek and potato. Soups were always made at breakfast time and stored in large urns to “let the flavors mingle”—an odd concept, given that they were simply a mixture of powdered ingredients and cold water with a slopped addition, if there were appropriate leftovers, of cream for white soups or house red wine for meat ones.

While I ate stoically, consuming whatever food the diners hadn’t chosen (except the crème caramel—one was enough for that experience), my brother responded to the idea that we were ambulatory dustbins by rejecting real food altogether. He saved his pocket money and spent it on chips and ice-cream cornets, on which he survived until he was seventeen and joined the army.

Today, we are exposed to food from across the world; we graze contentedly on the widest possible range of dishes and, like the sated Shah from the Arabian Nights, our constant cry is for something new. Sometimes, though, I think the limited choices of my early life were a blessing. It was good to know that dinner offered nothing more threatening than a crème caramel, and to have the excitement of counting down the number of Mediterranean chickens chosen by our guests, hoping there would be enough left for me. Life was simpler. Choices were something that other people made, and however little I liked what was put in front of me, I had the consolation of knowing that my food wasn’t chosen by my dentures.