

## Not So Easy

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There are many reasons to dislike dining out in these troubled times. There is, of course the particularly unpleasant experience of bonding with one's waiter or waitress, although the very worst bits of learning the restaurant employee's first name and hearing that he or she will be with us the length of the dining experience seem to have fallen slightly out of fashion, but the butt-numbing litany of the specials in endless detail continues to cast a pall over the long, long ordering process. And the fake cheeriness with its presumption of a warm and close personal relationship is still part of the unpleasantness. Do you really like hearing that your choice of cod cheeks seared in juniper impregnated butter was a good one? Or that the waiter is especially fond of the lamb loin in rosemary jelly and always orders it himself? I don't think so. It is probably unnecessary to advise the notorious cranks in our number here at the nicer end of Fourth Street of the best way to go to war with unwanted intimacy, but some others' of those here gathered are too sweet natured for their own good, and it doesn't hurt to explain that ordering a strong drink, not a white wine, make that a double, before the server has a chance to open his mouth, glaring furiously in the process, usually rattles his composure and tips the balance in the diner's favor. If you feel burning resentment and hurt feelings radiating from the lad in the apron while you study the menu, you have successfully executed this task and will be treated brusquely for much of your evening and you will be happier.

Those of you who dine exclusively at home or at a club may not be aware that your less fortunate fellow citizens, who must eat from time to time at what were once family restaurants, but which now call themselves casual dining venues, can expect to be blasted with very loud music throughout the meal. This music is not the swoony, Melachrino strings- Andre Kostelanetz- footlight favorites-aural sludge believed by mid-century social scientists to put one in a tranquil shopping-and-money-spending trance. Although that had to be so much humbug. Did you ever find yourself actually picking up an alligator purse to consider its purchase just because hidden speakers were oozing syrupy dumbed down George Gershwin? Certainly not. But elevator music, awful as it was, would be vastly preferable to the rock music that has been satanically pumped up to a level capable of pulverizing one's kidney stones *in situ*. The theory behind hammering American diners with stupid music played at cruelly punishing volume seems to be that American families, for whom casual family dining was invented, are thought to be panicked by gaps in the conversation and may, when faced by silence, order less food in order to end the casual dining process too quickly so that they may dash home to their separate rooms and separate electronic devices. This is almost certainly eyewash along the order of the subliminal alligator-purse-purchase-mood inducement, but until it is disproved, an evening at Applebees will continue to be an evening in hell. It must be further noted that all middle American restaurants seem to have decided, probably at the same trade convention in Las Vegas where they all agreed that what America really needed was fifteen ways to ruin a Margarita, that unless the middle American diner is served with an order of steak and fries large enough to feed all of the Philadelphia Eagles,

he will take offence and move his badly swollen body to the restaurant down the street to be served a deep fried onion the size of a pith helmet.

Nor are dining dysfunctions confined to the lower orders. In addition to the continuing fascination with seeing how little food can be put on the biggest possible plate at the highest possible price, swells and plutocrats must now face the disagreeable phenomenon of management whining at the very highest gustatory levels. Who among you would ever have thought that the proprietors of an ultra-luxury restaurant would have taken to throwing tantrums in the public press, threatening to leave town unless government steps in to make up for the customers who no longer fill an overdecorated dining room? Or that the same management would blame its empty banquettes on suburban fear of urban disorder? One has the unhappy feeling that the desperate owners of that outdated and overpriced eatery would not be happy until civil authorities have rounded up those supposedly terrified diners who have in truth found tranquility and fine grub in the wildly successful and decidedly more hip establishment located in an even darker and gloomier street in a decidedly unfashionable end of town and force marched those fickle customers back to the five star frog pond to be force fed microscopic lamb chop?

But. Even if the music at the odious and loathsome casual dining places were turned down, or better still off, even if your waitperson and bosom companion Jason were shamed into rendering the dignified service one expects in the most modest restaurant in the least pretentious square in Rome, even if tonight's special were printed on a small card one could ignore, even if the weird mania for either mammoth or minuscule servings were to pass, we would still have a problem.

You can't get a decent slice of pie.

Nowhere.

Certainly not at the top end restaurants where pastry chefs have decided that what we want is tiny little overpriced confections on vast oversized plates drizzled in reduced lingonberries so that one's pudding looks just like the microscopic lambchops that were not enough to keep a fashion model alive. Or chocolate slabs the color and consistency of suet pudding without the fun of the flames.

Certainly not at the casual fun family dining hells where, as with the main course, size is everything and nothing can be left alone. One can not order a simple slice of cake, let alone pie. There is only cake with complications. One can not order a bowl of fruit. Fruit still can not be swollen to the size of a full blown goiter, so it is of no interest to the menu planners who can only think big. I

Even at the handful of old fashioned lunch counters still hanging on, and their days are numbered, where pie in its simple, wholesome, god-given form, once flowed as freely as flapjacks, there is nothing that you or I would recognize as pie. The transparent pie tube that once sat on the counter displaying the - greats- blueberry-apple-cherry-lemon meringue - has been evicted, probably by evil health inspectors. No one bakes at Woolworth's. There's no Woolworth's.

Saddest of all, in kitchen after American kitchen, pie- the pastry that made America the happiest nation on the globe- is conspicuous in its absence.

Pie

Not so easy.

Should be.

Used to be.

There is a line in a song from Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*, "Can you bake a pie?" asks Cincinnati born Annie Oakley. . .

"No," snaps Buffalo Bill.

"Neither can I."

They're not the only ones. Almost no one can.

The song, by the way was "Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Better" and it really should be sung for the proper effect. But the reader doesn't sing. You'll just have to imagine, instead of some chirpy present day Broadway nonentity with a failed television program on his resume and a sound system in his wig, Ethel Merman and Alfred Drake for the proper effect. Although, as the many cognoscenti in these confines know, Ethel and Alfred have gone the way of a proper wedge of pie.

Oh, merciful heavens, it's sad . . .

The obligatory research: Pie is from the middle English "pie" meaning the only acceptable dessert, derived from Old French "pie" meaning the correct thing to eat after 9:00 p.m. when one is home and in one's nightclothes but feeling a little peckish, and ultimately from the Latin "pie" meaning "I could really go for something sweet but, you know, substantial after that bowl of peacock tongues."

Further dictionary entry notes that pie is a filling, often or usually fruit, in a pastry crust, sometimes sealed with further crust. If it were that simple, our subject would, instead of heavenly homebaked pies, those alarming Hostess Pies, confections pumped full of that ubiquitous high density fructose that keeps Archer Daniels Midland at the top of the free world's food chain, drizzled with sugar syrup, sealed into waxed envelopes, and shipped to gas stations and convenience stores and gas and convenience stores, where they are ammunition for the devil in the war on obesity, and to the Persian gulf where they have been discovered by ever inventive GIs to be cheap and effective ammo for those RPG launchers we hear so much about in the present war which is going a hell of a lot better than the aforementioned war on obesity.

Besides the Hostess fruit pie and projectile, it is necessary to discuss other things that real pie is not.

Real pie is not something rolled out in the millions by sophisticated machinery and frozen to the density of spent plutonium in a factory someplace in one of those nice big states west of Chicago to be sold to suckers who think that because there's a picture of pie on the carton and because it says pie that there will be something like a true pie inside.

Mississippi mud pie and derby pie are not pies. They are latter day inventions that give pie a bad name.

A flan is not a pie, nor is it an acceptable substitute.

Unless there is someone baking up pies one at a time from scratch that day in that restaurant, pie on a restaurant menu is a lie and a crime. Menus that say "homemade pie" are lies and criminal.

The sad truth is that real pie - good pie - can probably not be found, if it can be found at all, outside a private home. And only a good home cook can make it.

There was a lady from Lexington who set the planetary standard for pie construction. She was otherwise a spotty cook. Her vegetables were lackluster, perhaps because her pinchpenny husband did the shopping, bringing home house brands, quick sale items, and dented cans. And he ate within a small range, so perhaps she had given up. Or it is quite possible that she was a co-conspirator, or enabler of his bad eating and shopping habits. It may simply have been the broadspread mid-twentieth century disinterest in vegetables. Whatever. As they so frequently and usefully say nowadays. Vegetables were your basic defrost and butter operation with the occasional scorching for variety. She did do a nice gravy. "And where have nice gravies gone,?" I could ask if the subject were not pie.

And her pies were perfection. Because she was usually running late, her pies were often warm from the oven. Her crusts perfectly flaked, delicate, shuddering daintily when hacked by the fork, pale gold, never competing with the filling for flavor, latticed when appropriate, pierced prettily when solid. Perfection. It was a pleasure to watch other bakers when her pies hit the table at the church supper. How it would darken their evenings to see their own estimable creations ignored and hers snapped up even though she was widely known to be an inept housekeeper.

Her fillings were always simple. Just apple. Never Dutch apple or cranberry apple or apple and raisin. Just apple and spice to her own taste. And, as you must all be glad to know, because as all right thinking Americans know the queen of all pies is the rhubarb, her rhubarb was never never adulterated with strawberries. That idea is so strange and so wrong. Had she tried such a thing her children would have laid their sticky heads on their placemats and quietly wept.

What is notable is that her pie was easy. A daughter in law, thinking to cement her position, did a brief apprenticeship in the lady's untidy kitchen and noted that those famous pie crusts were assembled in a twinkling from the plainest of ingredients. What made them so excellent was the lady's minimal but deft handling. That and, her own idea of what a pie should be. She made it to suit herself. And she knew what she liked.

The lady from Lexington had a great rival - her detested sister-in-law, a woman from Chicago who used lard in her crust. The sister-in-law had her own weaknesses and shortcomings. Her gravy was not good, and she could be taken in by recipes in magazines, ill-conceived casseroles and dishes that involved powdered soup and dried onion rings, but her pies, large, substantial, midwestern, almost masculine in their heft, were wonders in their own right. She, being childless, took her own dark pleasure watching her nieces and nephews disloyally and frantically wolfing down her creations in front of their mother.

That great rivalry is dead now. The inimical cooks have gone to their own separate heavenly kitchens, apparently taking their secrets with them. No one ever again will get up from her sewing in the middle of the afternoon thinking that a pie would be nice for supper knowing that the ingredients and the know-how are at hand. No child will ever again find that the reward for finishing nutritious but repulsive chop suey is a slice of cocoanut cream pie lovingly assembled just an hour previously.

Hot dogs have been banned by the medical profession.

Cool kids would rather die than play baseball.

Chevrolet sells fewer cars than Hyundai. And there is no pie.

Pray for your country.

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