

AMERICAN DINNERS: HOW THEY ARE PREPARED.



HE principal thing that characterises an American dinner is its abundance. Huge joints of meat are not so common in this country as in England, eight pounds of sirloin, or an eight-pound leg of mutton, being considered a fairly large joint, while the English sixteen to twenty-pound roasts are never seen in private families. But outside of the size of the joint, everything else is on a larger proportionate scale—large dishes of vegetables, and great variety of them, large pies, and a huge tureen full of soup—however few are going to sit at table. Anything less than such abundance savours, to most Americans, of stint; and it is common to hear it remarked among them, of English tables, that everything seemed so scant. "Such a tiny tart for three people!" One may ask—small as it was—if there was not more than sufficient, and be answered in the affirmative; but to those accustomed to see pies made a foot in diameter, whether there are two or eight to eat it, the average English fruit tart would indeed look very small. By the way, when speaking of American "pies," I mean the article peculiar to the country—tarts are unknown as we understand them, *pies* are in their place, and are a great "institution;" pumpkin (commonly pronounced "punkin") and apple pie taking the lead in popularity, although cocoa-nut, custard, and lemon pies are all favourites, small fruit less so.

In providing for their table, the mass of Americans rarely consider what goes with what (of course there are the epicurean few who do). Except the Yankee "pork and beans," there seems to be no viand so wedded to vegetable as to be spoken of together, like our "duck and green peas," "mutton and turnips," &c. Generally speaking, vegetables are chosen haphazard, and so carrots, or dried beans, or turnips are as often served with poultry as not; no question of the "eternal fitness" of things seems to trouble the average housekeeper. Then, not only is the unfitness of certain vegetables for certain meats unthought of, but the vegetables themselves are served with sublime disregard to harmony, and so peas and asparagus, and summer squash and potatoes, often find themselves cheek by jowl on one plate. From four to six vegetables are often served at once, and two merely are considered by any but very fashionable people (who affect English and French customs very much) to be a very mean sort of dinner.

Tomatoes, in some form or other, are invariably on the table when in season, and more often than not canned, even in winter. But although they are now as generally eaten as potatoes are with us, I am told that twenty-five years ago they were quite rare, and few people liked them. They are now, however, the most popular of all vegetables, except potatoes, which are here called "Irish potatoes," to distinguish them from the sweet esculent, and are cooked in a variety of ways—some, I think, quite new to English people.

Thanksgiving Day, which falls on the last Thursday in November, is the great dinner day of the American year; for that festival turkeys are fattened, mince pies and pumpkin pies, and cranberry sauce—always eaten with turkey—are in order, and preparations for Thanksgiving Dinner keep cooks afoot for days beforehand, as Christmas does in England. Not that Christmas is a neglected feast in this country, by any means, but it seems less national than Thanksgiving.

All puddings at American tables are eaten with sauce of some kind, even baked milk puddings; and most popular of sauces is that called "hard sauce." As it is very ornamental, and for some puddings, such as boiled lemon or batter, a very acceptable addition to our list of sauces, I will give it later.

Oysters, of course, take a very prominent part at the American dinner-table. Oyster soup, being certain to suit all tastes, makes its appearance oftener than any other; and oyster pie is one of the favourite accompaniments to roast turkey, as tongue or ham is with English people.

No account of an American dinner would be complete without allusion to celery, which plays a very important part; it is not, as with us, introduced only at the end, with cheese, but the celery glass is put on with the castor, and removed only with it—that is to say, just when at an English table it would come on. Most people take it as the French do radishes, as as soon they take their places, and nibble at it while awaiting the soup, and again when soup is removed, and so on through the dinner. A very delicious soup is made from it, which I have never seen out of this country, and which I will therefore append.

Oyster soup is made in several ways, each differing from the English method, and varying from very good to very bad; the following are the best recipes I know of:—Strain the liquor from two quarts of oysters, add to it a tea-cupful of water, and set it to heat slowly in a covered vessel. When it is near boiling, season with pepper and salt, and stir in a quart of milk; either stir constantly or set the vessel containing the liquor in a pot of boiling water. When the soup is again near boiling add the two quarts of oysters, and two table-spoonfuls of butter rolled in one of flour, stir till it boils, then let the whole simmer five minutes, when it is ready to serve.

Another and richer soup is made as follows:—Strain the liquor from two quarts of oysters as before, add a tea-cupful of water, and season with salt, cayenne, a little nutmeg, and a blade of mace; when near boiling add half the oysters, chopped *very* finely, boil five minutes fast, then strain the soup and return it to the saucepan with a quart of milk. Now have ready some very small forcemeat balls, made of the yolks of two hard-boiled eggs worked to a smooth paste with butter, then mix a tea-spoonful of finely chopped parsley, and six raw oysters chopped very finely, season, and bind with raw yolk of egg; flour your hands and make into tiny balls. When the soup

boils, drop in the remaining quart of oysters and the balls, boil five minutes *gently*, then beat the yolks of two eggs, take a cup of the soup liquor (which you must have drawn back from the fire), add it gradually to the eggs, beating all the while, stir into this a table-spoonful of butter, and then add all to the soup; stir till it reaches the boiling point—but it must *not boil*, or the eggs will curdle—then serve.

Slices of lemon are served with oyster soup, which is here eaten with a kind of biscuit, made on purpose for eating with oysters, called "oyster crackers." Some, however, prefer butter biscuits.

In making oyster soup the principal thing to guard against is either over or under-cooking them. Over-cooked, they are shrunken and tough; under-cooked, flabby and disagreeable. Five minutes' simmering is generally enough to cook them; the right point, however, may best be told by the oyster becoming quite plump, and the beard "frilled." Oysters are never bearded by American cooks.

Tomato soup is second only to oyster soup in popularity. Many would say, perhaps, that it reigns supreme over every other in America, and one or two hotels have acquired such fame for its perfection that they put it up in cans, and send it over the country to such unfavoured mortals as appreciate it, but live at a distance from the spot where it daily sends forth its fragrance. Like oyster soup, it is made in several ways; the following recipe is good, and perhaps the most general:—

Make stock of three pounds of veal and one gallon of water, reducing it to two quarts; scald two quarts of fresh tomatoes, to remove the skin, take away the hard core, and cut them up fine. Strain the stock, put in the tomatoes, stirring hard, that they may dissolve thoroughly, boil half an hour. Season with chopped parsley or celery, and pepper and salt; strain again, and stir in a large table-spoonful of butter with a tea-spoonful of white sugar before pouring into the tureen.

This soup is still better if made of the liquor in which chickens have been boiled. Another excellent tomato soup is made as follows:—

Take a dozen ripe tomatoes stewed without water, as before directed, strain them through a coarse sieve, and to the liquid add a large piece of butter rolled in flour, stir till dissolved, then allow to boil once, add a pint of milk, stir all together, but do not boil again, simply allowing the soup to be thoroughly hot. If it should boil after the milk is added it will curdle.

Stewed tomatoes are prepared as follows:—

Loosen the skins by pouring scalding water upon them, peel and cut them up, remove any hard or unripe parts, stew in a thick saucepan (enamelled is the best) for half an hour, *without adding any water*—the juice is sufficient; then add salt, pepper, a tea-spoonful of sugar and a table-spoonful of butter

rolled in flour; simmer gently a quarter of an hour longer, or till the juice is sufficiently reduced. A minced onion—a very small one—improves the flavour for those who like them.

Stuffed tomatoes are a very favourite dish with the Americans, as with French people. Choose large smooth tomatoes, cut a thin slice from the blossom end of each and lay it aside, scoop out the inside, and chop it fine with some veal stuffing; fill the tomatoes; fit the tops on neatly, place in rows in a deep dish, and bake three-quarters of an hour.

Broiled tomatoes:—Select large firm ones, slice half an inch thick, and broil on a small gridiron. A few minutes suffice to cook them. Have ready in a cup some hot butter, seasoned with pepper, salt, a little sugar, and half a tea-spoonful of made mustard. As soon as the tomatoes are done, dip each piece in this mixture, and lay in a hot dish. When all are dished, heat what remains of the butter seasoning to a boil, and pour it over them; serve very hot. By lovers of tomatoes this is considered a very delicious mode of cooking.

Another method of cooking is to scald, peel, and cut a hole in the top of each, into which put a piece of butter, a little pepper and salt, set in the oven and bake an hour, covering them the first half of the time; five minutes before serving, pour over them four table-spoonfuls of cream, whipped a few minutes with some warmed butter.

But notwithstanding the various modes of cooking the tomato in vogue, in no way are they more frequently used than cut up raw and used as salad, either with sugar and vinegar, oil and vinegar, or with the following dressing:—

To twelve tomatoes, peeled and sliced, take four hard-boiled eggs, one raw egg, one tea-spoonful of salt, one salt-spoonful of cayenne, one tea-spoonful of white sugar, one table-spoonful of salad oil, two tea-spoonfuls of made mustard, one tea-cupful of vinegar. Rub the hard yolks to a smooth paste, adding salt, pepper, sugar, mustard, and oil. Beat the raw egg to a froth and stir it in; lastly the vinegar. Peel the tomatoes, slice them a quarter of an inch thick, and set in a dish on ice, or in a very cold place, while you make the dressing. Stir a lump of ice rapidly in the dressing, when made, till cold, then take it out and cover the tomatoes with the mixture, setting it back on ice until you send it to table. This is a delicious salad, especially when ice-cold.

The before-mentioned "celery cream soup" is made as follows:—

Take the white part of two large heads of celery, either grate it or chop it very fine, set it to boil in a quart of milk, in which put a cup of rice; allow the rice and celery to slowly stew until they can be rubbed through a coarse sieve, adding more milk if they get too thick, then add to them an equal quantity of strong veal or chicken broth, white pepper and salt to taste.

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