



CLAIRE STEWART

ALL IN GOOD TASTE: THE VICTORIAN WEDDING BREAKFAST

Contemporary weddings are often defined by money. According to one source, average American couples in 2016 spent more than \$35,000 on their nuptials, much of that on food.¹ Cuisine as a marker of social standing is not new, nor is the concept of flaunting economic success via lavish weddings. Americans in the Victorian era had a particularly complicated relationship with food, and tying a survey of eating habits to an examination of wedding practices offers a powerful vehicle in which to investigate society.

The mid- and late nineteenth century was a galvanizing time in American culture, ushering in a shrinking divide between the elite and those on the lower rungs of society. Improved technology and transportation allowed a democratization of the distribution of luxury goods. Immigrants and ambitious citizens acquired wealth at a rate alarming to the old guard. In 1880, there were eighty times more American millionaires than there had been in 1840. The traditionally privileged, in an effort to differentiate themselves from the newly prosperous, pursued new forms of exhibition and a complicated code of etiquette. Their behavior was, in turn, imitated by those wishing to move up the social ladder.²

The dining room was a savage arena. Victorian meals were perilous for those not raised amidst the complicated rules of the upper-class table. The manner in which guests were regaled at wedding receptions (called wedding breakfasts, no matter when they were served, up until the mid-twentieth century) paraded social standing. How food was given and consumed reflected many other decisions made by class-oriented families, such as choice of church, guest list, attire, and even stationery.

For the well-heeled Victorian, the trappings of food consumption, particularly elaborate table settings and floral arrangements, far eclipsed concern for the actual food. Sustenance was a reminder of the physical world — associated with labor at farms and in kitchens, as well as coarse bodily functions and hunger. Meat and vegetables were particular reminders of earthiness and appetite, both undesirable to delicate Victorian souls. In response, food was cooked into oblivion and smothered in sauces. The more manipulated, the more desirable the food.³

A look at vegetable recipes in the 1896 edition of the *Boston Cooking School Cook Book* is one illustration. Cabbage was covered in white sauce and bread crumbs, while cauliflower was given the option of being creamed, made au gratin, or coated with hollandaise sauce. Cauliflower a la Huntington was an intricate emulsion of powdered sugar, egg yolks, curry powder, and dried mustard. Not even cucumbers were safe, needing to be stuffed, dipped in egg, fried, and coated with béchamel sauce. It was common for chefs to give their creations French names that honored celebrities or fashionable locales.⁴ Dishes with disorienting

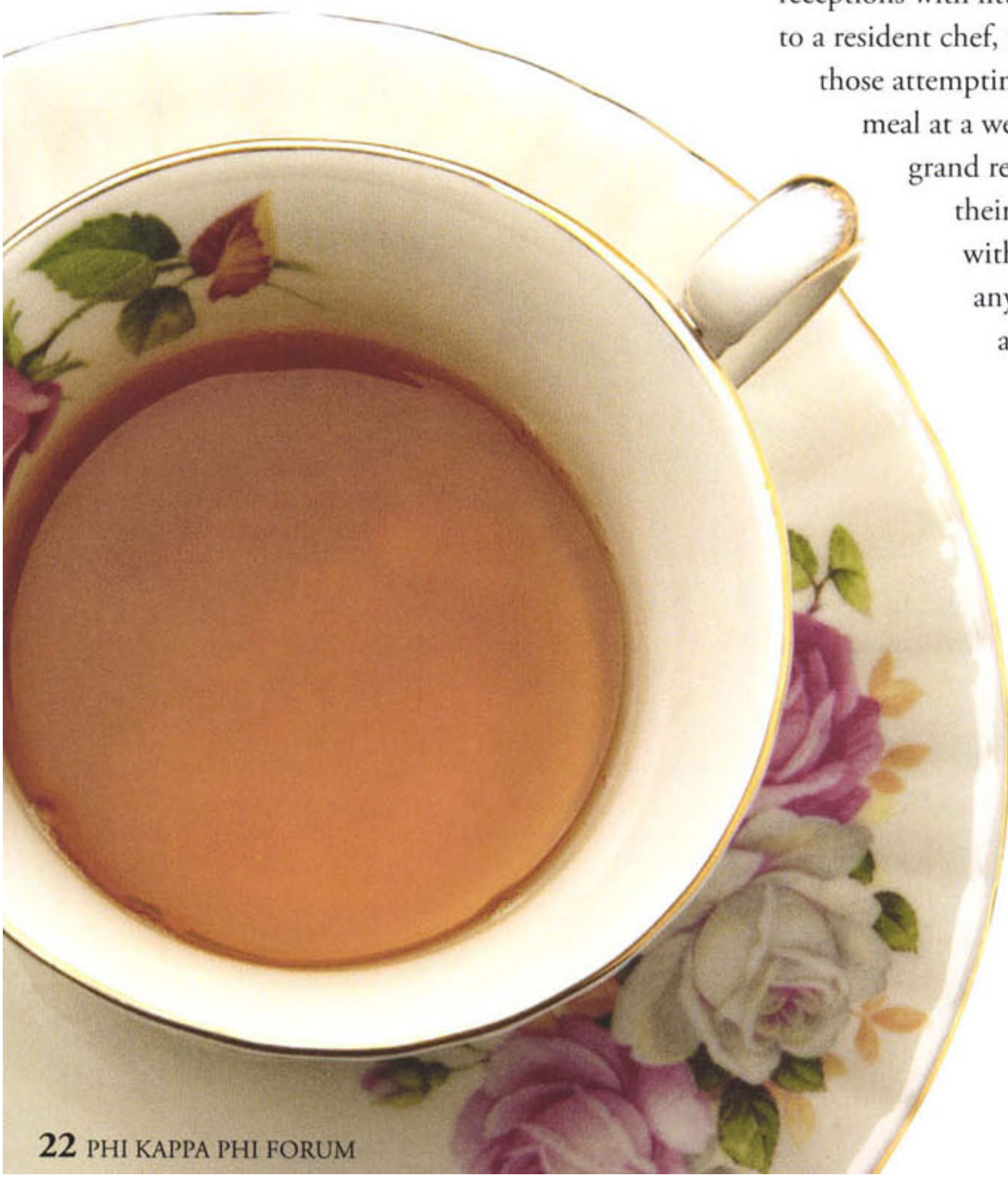
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names such as Riz de Veau a' la Palestine removed food even further from its source and served as a barrier to those unable to decipher or pronounce it.⁵

Researcher Carol McD. Wallace wrote that the establishment was “aghast at the flood of New Money mimicking patrician weddings.”⁶ Industrialization brought formal personalized stationery within the reach of many, yet only the astute knew to feel the backs of wedding invitations to see if they were truly engraved. There was indeed a deep bench of society mavens who could sniff out social imposters, and it was they who knew that weddings could be differentiated and ranked by what they didn't have as much as by what they did have.⁷ Heiress Pauline Whitney's wedding in 1895 was attended by Vanderbilts, Astors, Rockefellers, and President Grover Cleveland. *The New York Times* front page reported “There was an air of simplicity about the reception, as there had been at the wedding, that was greatly appreciated by the guests.”⁸

To offer a lot of food at a wedding party was deemed gluttonous and smacked of trying too hard. The elite didn't need to impress, so they didn't, hosting simple receptions with little food and minimal attention to appetite. For those accustomed to a resident chef, there was little motivation to seduce guests with lavish meals. To those attempting to publicly announce their newfound prosperity, a sumptuous meal at a wedding repast signaled economic triumph. Chefs, now installed in grand restaurants and hotels, were no longer confined to private residences, their services enjoyed by anyone who could pay the bill. Even citizens with modest financial success could rent space in banquet halls. Now anyone could acquire class for the length of a meal, and to do so with a wedding ensured the experience had witnesses.

A proliferation of etiquette guides blossomed in the nineteenth century, meant to help social climbers decode an increasingly complicated system. Weddings were given particular attention, assuring readers that conduct once acceptable was now vulgar, and that care should be taken to project good breeding. Etiquette doyenne Eliza Leslie wrote in 1864 that “a crowd at a wedding was now obsolete,” elaborating that the couple's social position could be damaged by a cluttered assembly of participants.⁹ In 1873, etiquette writer Daisy Eyebright (real name Sophia Orne Edwards Johnson) warned of having too extensive a guest list, adding that, “Life may be compared to a trumpet, small at one end and large at another.”¹⁰ *Modern Etiquette in Public and Private* (1887) advised readers that, in the case of a wedding tea, the bride and groom must not sit while guests stand;



the notion of the bridal party having special status was “not being altogether in good taste.”¹¹

For the groom, the 1866 *Martine’s Hand-Book of Etiquette and Guide to True Politeness* warned that “nothing indicates the good breeding of a gentleman so much as his manners at table.”¹² The text described an elbow on the table as among the “heresies of the most infidel”; this behavior was particularly heinous because “people are more easily disgusted” while dining.¹³

The Gilded Age’s fascination with table accessories was an opportunity for the rich to purchase luxury items, and also served as a way for the savvy to detect the caliber of those goods. Elaborate silverware, such as bonbon spoons, ice cream forks, cucumber servers, and sardine forks further categorized food and ramped up the perils of dining for those unfamiliar with negotiating a table laden with utensils. The era was preoccupied with vulgarity. “The custom of putting toothpicks on the table is very vulgar and families of refinement do not allow it,” says a 1901 popular household manual, *Smiley’s Cook Book and Universal Household Guide*.¹⁴ A demonstration of wealth was considered as vulgar as tendering toothpicks, yet money

was at the same time expected to be displayed in subtle and predetermined ways. It would seem etiquette rules were contradictory and changeable, requiring constant monitoring.

Food in this context was certainly expected to be appetizing, but readers were warned not to be over-eager, and that it was “not good taste to praise extravagantly every dish that is set before you.”¹⁵ Martine’s handbook instructed its audience never to speak to servants harshly, not because it was unkind, but because it could act as a tell of one’s roots. “To speak to a waiter in a driving manner will create among well-bred people, the suspicion that you were sometime a servant yourself, and are putting on airs at the thought of your promotion.”¹⁶

Nuptials were public and meant to broadcast the role of a newly formed alliance. Signals of affluence were contradictory and changeable, and not easily decoded by those who had not inherited their social position. Contemporary wedding celebrants now revel in displaying wealth, and take pride in flouting wedding norms. Now as then, weddings are a powerful indicator of status.

For works cited: go to www.phikappaphi.org/forum/fall2017

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