



Eating History

A New York Public Library program asks the public to help transcribe 10,000 historic menus

TO READ THE MAY 13, 1900 dinner menu at Rector's, the midtown New York lobster house, is to engage in a little virtual hedonism: the fare includes 57 cuts of meat, 24 oyster dishes, 16 variations of lobster, and five kinds of duck. Some of the well-heeled diners on a weekend evening may have come from the Broadway Theatre's hit production of *Ben-Hur*, which featured a live chariot race staged by actors driving eight galloping horses over two onstage treadmills. Rector's patrons might have expected to encounter millionaire financier James Buchanan Brady (known as "Diamond Jim" after his habit of handing out diamonds to lady friends) at

his usual table, gorging himself on a gallon of orange juice, multiple orders of Lynnhaven oysters, lobster, duck, steak, turtles, pies, and a two-pound box of candy. He reputedly would stop eating only after his massive belly had gained four inches and brushed the edge of the table.

The menu at Rector's is only one of the delicious treats at the New York Public Library's new digitized historic menu archive, "What's on the Menu?" The library's novel project invites the public to help transcribe more than 10,000 historic American menus, dating between 1860 and 1907.

Menus showcase saloons such as Washington, D.C.'s Ebbitt House Hotel (now the Old Ebbitt Grill), long the favorite haunt of presidents,

as well as the dinner fare onboard the opulent Hudson River steamship *Mary Powell*.

A powerful search engine enables users to research when a particular dish came on menus. (Tutti-frutti, for instance, a dessert consisting of ice cream with pieces of fruit, first appears in 1896 and last in 1907.) Another feature plots

the relative position that a dish occupied on a menu, whether among the appetizers at the top or in the upper left or bottom with the entrees.



SHELL FISH, ETC.

Broiled live lobster, Chili sauce...	.80; half .40
Broiled live lobster, stuffed...	1.00; half .50
Steamed live lobster, parsley sauce...	.90; half .50
Cold boiled lobster...	.80; half .40
Deviled lobster...	1.00; half .50
Lobster à la Williams...	1.00
Lobster, Bordelaise...	1.00
Lobster à l'Américaine...	1.00
Lobster à la Newburg...	1.00
Lobster à la Française...	.90
Curry of lobster...	.90
Lobster à la Créole...	.90
Escalloped lobster...	.90
Lobster croquettes, shrimp sauce...	.90
Lobster cutlets...	.90
Stewed lobster...	.90
Deviled crab...	.40
Crab ravigote...	.60
Stuffed crab...	.75
Hard shell crabs...	.40
Escalloped crabmeat...	1.00
Crabmeat à la Maryland...	1.00
Oyster crabs à la Newburg...	1.50
Oyster crabs sautés...	1.50
Stewed oyster crabs...	1.50
Fried scallops...	.50
Terrapin...	2.50
Stewed snapper...	.90
Frogs legs, fried...	.75
Poulette...	.75

RELISHES	
Anchovies on toast...	.35
Caviar on toast...	.40
Tomato, Surprise...	.40
Celery...	.25
Olives...	.25
Stuffed olives...	.25
Stuffed mangoes...	.35
Radishes...	.20
Gherkins...	.15
Pickled walnuts...	.25
Pickled beets...	.20
Small onions...	.40
Sardines...	.40
Butter-Dum...	.40
OYSTERS	
Blue Point cocktail...	.30
Blue Points...	.25
Cutlets...	.25
Rockwells...	.30
Shrewsbury...	.30
Cape Cod...	.25
Lynnhaven Bay...	.25
Shell roast...	.70; half .35
Pepper roast...	.70; half .35
Fancy or Pan roast...	.70; half .35
Steamed, in shell...	.70; half .35
Seamed, Washington style...	.70; half .35
Broiled, buttered cream sauce...	.70; half .35
Escalloped, in shell...	1.00; half .50
Butter-Dum...	.70; half .35
Cream stew...	.50
Dry stew...	.50
Fried system...	.80; half .40
Fried oysters in butter, tomato sauce...	.80; half .40
Rector's combination fry...	.50
Oyster party...	.75
Oysters à la Newburg...	.75
Oysters en brochette...	.75
Oysters au gratin...	.75
Oysters Algonquin...	.75
CLAMS	
Clam cocktail...	.30
Little Necks, on shell...	.25
Large clams, on shell...	.25
Steamed Little Necks...	.50
Stewed Little Necks...	.50
Shell roast, Little Necks...	.50
Fancy or Pan Roast, Little Necks...	.50
Steamed soft shell clams, Boston style...	.50
Fried soft shell clams...	.60
Stewed soft shell clams...	.60
Shell roast soft shell clams...	.60
Fancy or Pan roast soft shell clams...	.60
Soft shell clams en brochette...	.60
Mixed clams...	.60
Clam fritters...	.60
SOUPS	
Chicken consommé...	.50
Chicken cka...	.60
Strained okra in cup...	.35
Mock turtle...	.40
Crôte au-pot...	.40
Consommé in cup...	.35
Consommé jelly in cup...	.30
Chicken consommé jelly in cup...	.35
Seit pea...	.40
Consommé Julienne...	.40
Strained okra jelly in cup...	.35
Clear green turn soup...	.75
Clear green turtle in cup...	.40
Clam chowder...	.35
Clam broth, in cup...	.35
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Poulette...	.75
FISH	
Escallop...	.50
Halibut...	.60
Fresh mackerel...	.60
Petfish...	.60
Sea bass...	.60
Striped bass...	.60
Black bass...	.60
Plaunders...	.60
Pilet of sole...	.60
Pilet of bass à la Marguerite...	.75
Pompano...	.50
Fish cakes (25)...	.40
Kipperd herring...	.35
Shad, broiled...	.50
Shad planked, whole...	.50; half .25
Smelts...	.60
Salmon broiled...	.60
Salmon boiled, Hollandaise...	.50
Salmon cold, sauce tartare...	.80
Spanish mackerel...	.65
Whitefish...	.60
Kingsfish...	.65
Sheepshead...	.65
Whitefish, broiled...	.60
Whitefish, planked, whole...	2.00; half 1.00
Pinnas haddie, steamed...	.60
Pinnas haddie à la Rector...	.75
GAME	
Canvas back duck...	.40
Red head duck...	.40
Mallard duck...	.40
Teal duck...	.40
Ruddy duck...	.40
Road birds...	.40
Squab...	.40
English snipe...	.40
Plover...	.40
Rail birds...	.40
English Pheasant...	.40

"Transcribing almost mimics the feeling of being at a restaurant and perusing the menu," says the library's electronic resources coordinator, Rebecca Federman. Unlike today, eating out was mostly the province of the wealthy, so most of the reveal the kinds of dishes by the rich and famous they paid, and the variety of foods available in cities before the complete takeover of industrial husbandry and agriculture. menus.nypl.org.