TOP OF THE MENU

by Nancy Knickerbocker

In June 1897, Queen Victoria and her blue-blooded brood sat down to a Royal Luncheon. Nothing special: Just consomme a la Sarah Bernhardt (whatever that is) followed by lamb chops and asparagus with hollandaise sauce. But to Vancouver collector Shirley Lipovsky, the menu from that not terribly majestic meal is quite special. It's one of the oldest in her vast collection of menus from around the globe. She has gathered more than 3,500 bills of fare, many of which mark newsworthy events.

The menus of state dinners -- such as those held for the proclamation of the state of Israel or Queen Elizabeth's 25th wedding anniversary -- are as lavish as the meals. That from the Shah of Iran's coronation is a huge piece of parchment, inscribed with gold ink and bearing two large red seals with satin ribbons. "It was a long shot, but I just wrote to Empress Farah and asked her for one," Lipovsky said. "It arrived rolled up like a scroll and wrapped in muslin." And she has another side to the Iran story: On their return to the U.S., the American hostages stayed at the Thayer Hotel in West Point, New York. "They were well fed, let me tell you," Lipovsky said. She should know.

Some menus are works of art. One of Lipovsky's favorites is in Chinese, hand painted with birds and flowers on a delicate silk fan. Others -- like the menu from a Christmas party for the TV series Upstairs, Downstairs -- are just fun to have. "Also, I'm a real Noel Coward fan," she said. So the menu from his 70th birthday party, held in 1969 at London's Savoy Hotel, is another favorite. She has menus from the White House, La Scala Opera House, the United Nations, the Tate Gallery -- the list goes on and on.

Many have been collected for her by vacationing friends. "I'm really an armchair traveler," Lipovsky said. "But the collecting brings a travelogue to me. And I learn a bit of history and geography as well." For other menus, she has written away. "I never cease being amazed at the response I get," she said. "I don't think I've been refused more than a few times. The Russian ones are the most difficult to get. They won't send you a thing."

Sometimes a lively correspondence with other collectors arises out of a request for a menu. "I correspond with the maître d' of the Georges V Hotel in Paris," Lipovsky said. "I first wrote to him when the Viet Nam peace talks were held there and he wrote back asking for some Canadian stamps."

Her collector's curiosity has also sparked an interest in calligraphy, graphic design and paper making. Her menus are printed on everything from rice, onion and parchment paper to wood, satin and leather. One from a New Year's Eve gala at a Liechtenstein hotel is printed on a dainty pink Swiss linen handkerchief.

There is one depressing aspect to this collection: it documents the relentless progress of inflation. A 1939 bill of fare offers a dinner special, including soup, entree, vegetable, dessert and beverage, for 50 cents. "On one of my newer menus a cup of tea is over $2," she says. "No cup of tea is worth $2."

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"SHIRLEY LIPOVSKY and part of her massive menu collection"
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