Menu Collecting: Armchair Cook's Tour

by Donna Anderson

To most people, a menu is nothing more than a bill of fare proffered by a maître d’ in a restaurant. Menus are much more than this to Shirley Lipovsky. They are her hobby and her means of armchair travel to other countries.

She collects menus from hotels, restaurants and state residences throughout the world. "I wanted to travel," Miss Lipovsky said, "and menu-collecting became a substitute. My brother has been in the restaurant business for 30 years and food is a pretty general topic of conversation around the house. I guess that is was natural that any hobby I had would have to do with food." Miss Lipovsky, who calls herself a "so-so" cook, collected recipes like most women around the kitchen range.

SNOWBALLED

Her hobby snowballed over a 20 year period and she now has more than 3500 menus from assorted countries. She knows that Carriers of London features Souvlakia of Turbot, Sauce Mousseline: the Marco Polo in the Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong serves Chop Wui Soup, and a funny little tattered menu from a small restaurant in Paris urges its customers Saumon Fume (smoked salmon to the uninitiated).

"When you study a menu, the country becomes alive" Miss Lipovsky said. "You get a travelogue just by looking at them -- at least that is what they do to me. Menus from other countries stimulate my imagination."

"The artistry in some really intrigues me."
And the response she receives to her request "rather awes" her, she said. "It shows the graciousness of people all over the world."

FROM NEPAL

Miss Lipovsky read of a hotel restaurant in Nepal in the travel pages of the Sun and wrote the manager asking for a sample menu. The menu arrives with a request for a copy of the newspaper. He wrote again on receipt of the paper and a lively correspondence followed. Another time...when she wrote to a restaurant in Brussels, the maître d’ in a letter written in his best but not-too-fluent English, asked for Canadian stamps for his grandchildren in return.

In her collection, Miss Lipovsky has an unusual parchment scroll menus used in 1940 at the anniversary banquet for Master Johannes Gutenberg at the Royal York in Toronto. There is a rice paper menu from an Indonesian room in Amsterdam that is so complete it has instructions on how to eat the food printed in English.

FROM GOVERNMENT

She obtained the souvenir menu for Canada's Centennial Ball in London last spring and Mrs. George R. Pearkes, wife of the lieutenant-governor, sent her copies of 18 official menus used on state visits at Government House. She has received two menus used on state occasions from Mrs. Lester B. Pearson in Ottawa and through the former chef to the Kennedy family,
obtained a copy of a White House menu. "I was unable to get a menu from the White House but when I read that Chef Verdon was writing a book, I wrote to his publisher and in return received the luncheon menu for Tuesday, April 3, 1962." I have not been able to get one from the Johnson administration, but I did have a note from Liz Carpenter, Mrs. Johnson's secretary, explaining that they do not give souvenirs."

**MOST TREASURED**

One of her most treasured and prized menus arrived a few days ago rolled in heavy cardboard and wrapped in canvas. It was the menu of the banquet in the Tehran Hilton celebrating the coronation of the Shah of Iran and Empress Farah. The scroll is tied in velvet ribbon with a red leather crest and once unfolded, lists 28 items written in both French and Persian. To get this menu, Miss Lipovsky wrote the empress and in three or four weeks, her request was granted.

Not all requests are answered so readily. "I have written more than 500 letters for menus and only about 50 have not been acknowledged," she said. "I have had less response from France and Italy than any other countries -- especially France. When you think of good eating, and good restaurants, you immediately think of France, so naturally, it was one country I did send a number of letters to.

**NONE PREPARED**

"The Master of the Household at Buckingham Palace replied that he was unable to send a menu and Mrs. John Lindsay, wife of the governor of New York State, wrote that Gracie Mansion did not have any prepared menus."

Miss Lipovsky often receives invitations to dine at restaurants she has written to. Her collection is listed and filed alphabetically and has been exhibited to the Canadian Restaurant Association. She reads her menus but does not try to duplicate them in her own kitchen. "I am adventurous in my taste but not in my cooking. I like international cooking and of course, being Jewish, I am particularly fond of Jewish cooking.

**JEWISH COOKING**

"I get a terrible yen sometimes for the food my mother cooked in my childhood -- I can still recall the aroma and the taste."

Miss Lipovsky will continue to seek out her menus from many lands, follow up on her correspondence and learn more of the customs and manners of foreign countries and one day, she would like to write articles or a book about the menus and the letters of the people she has contacted. The name would be a natural, *A Chair-born Cook's Tour.*

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