

A Menu and a Mystery

The Case of the 1834 Delmonico Bill of Fare

FEW DOCUMENTS IN AMERICAN culinary history claim more attention than the so-called 1834 Delmonico menu (see p.41). A simple Google search turns up more than nine thousand Web pages, and references to this bill of fare appear in untold numbers of articles, newspaper columns, and books. Allegedly created in 1834, this document is most often touted as the first restaurant menu printed in America. It is referred to in a variety of other contexts as well, ranging from histories of Delmonico's restaurant and of that quintessential "American" food, the hamburger, to discussions about the semantics of menus and the history of menu design. The prices it quotes have been used to illustrate costs and inflation, and it has been co-opted to tout restaurants aspiring to the standards set long ago by the famed restaurateur Lorenzo Delmonico.¹ But is this menu really what it purports to be?

The first New York Delmonico restaurant and catering service, later affectionately known as "Del's," was founded by two Swiss brothers, John (Giovanni, aka Jean) and Peter (Pietro, aka Pierre) Del-Monico, in 1827. According to Lately Thomas's book *Delmonico's: A Century of Splendor*, John (1788–1842) first came to America in 1824 from his native Marengo, a town in southern Switzerland, near Italy.² He set up a wine importing and rebottling business in New York City. In 1826 he journeyed home to convince his brother Peter (1783–1860), a confectioner, to return to Manhattan with him. Around 1827 the two established a café-cum-pastry shop at 23 William Street, near Wall Street. Then, around 1831, they expanded next door to 25 William Street with a *restaurant français*. The brothers also established a lodging house around 1834. Even the fire of December 16, 1835, which destroyed huge sections of the Wall Street district, along with the Delmonico restaurant on William Street, did not slow the brothers down; they reopened the following day in their shop next door.³

As the Delmonico brothers' business grew, they wrote home requesting additional manpower. Over the next few years, their brother Francesco sent his sons Siro, Constant,

François, and Lorenzo (1813–1881), who, after arriving in Manhattan in 1831, soon became the most celebrated Delmonico of all.⁴ With the backing of his uncles, Lorenzo opened a hostelry called the Hotel Delmonico around 1846. All meals were served à la carte, after the French fashion; there was also a bar. This hostelry closed in 1854, replaced by the Stevens House, but the Delmonico restaurant serving French food thrived. As society migrated uptown, the Delmonico family followed, sequentially opening locations to serve the beau monde's every whim. By 1884 there were four elegant, expensive, well-managed, family-owned Delmonico restaurants: 56 Beaver at South William Street, 76 Broad Street, Fifth Avenue and 26th Street, and 112–114 Broadway at Pine Street.

Dining on French food at Del's had been a gastronomically pleasing, if costly, venture from the start. An impressive eleven-page *CARTE DU RESTAURANT FRANÇAIS DES FRÈRES DELMONICO*, preserved in the archives of the Museum of the City of New York, promised patrons a grand gustatory experience.⁵ The menu, printed "by T. & C. Wood, Stationers, 18 Wall Street" in 1838, presents items in both French and English, which was unusual for the time. Prices are indicated in both shillings and pence.⁶ The robust bill of fare begins with double-column lists of *POTAGES/SOUPS* and *HORS D'OEUVRES/SIDE DISHES*, then moves to *ENTREÉS DE BOEUF/BEEF*, *ENTREÉS DE VEAU/VEAL*, *ENTREÉS DE VOLAILLE/POULTRY*, *RÔTS/ROASTS*, *ENTREÉS DE POISSON/FISH*, *ENTREMETS/VEGETABLES*, *EGGS, &c.*, *ENTREMETS SUCRÉS/PASTRIES*, *CAKES*, *DESSERT*, and ends with *LIQUEURS* and *VINS/WINES*. The Delmonico brothers offered their well-heeled patrons a veritable cornucopia of gastronomic delights—one that remains tantalizing to read and imagine, even after 170 years.

The contrast between the oft-cited 1834 menu and that of 1838 raises an interesting question: In four short years, what could have made the Delmonico brothers change their menu from a single sheet in English listing a few

DELMONICO'S

RESTAURANT.

494. PEARL STREET.

BILL OF FARE.

Cup Tea or Coffee,	1	Pork Chops,	4
Bowl " "	2	Pork and Beans,	4
Crullers,	1	Sausages,	4
Soup,	2	Puddings,	4
Fried or Stewed Liver,	3	Liver and Bacon,	5
" " Heart,	3	Roast Beef or Veal,	5
Hash,	3	Roast Mutton,	5
Pies,	4	Veal Cutlet,	5
Half Pie,	2	Chicken Stew,	5
Beef or Mutton Stew,	4	Fried Eggs,	5
Corn Beef and Cabbage,	4	Ham and Eggs,	10
Pigs Head, " "	4	Hamburger Steak,	10
Fried Fish,	4	Roast Chicken,	10
Beef Steak,	4		

Regular Dinner 12 Cents.

Smith & Handford Printers 23 and 25 Day St. N. Y.

FIGURE 2

plain dishes like hamburger steak that cost only pennies, to an extravagant, eleven-page dual-language "tome" featuring elaborate French cuisine that cost many dollars?

As the century progressed and patrons became richer, increasingly lavish affairs took place in the Delmonico dining rooms. Famous writers like Charles Dickens and Mark Twain, political operators like Boss Tweed, and legendary spenders like Diamond Jim Brady all celebrated at Delmonico's. Special-event dinners and luncheons featured commemorative menus, some festooned with satin ribbons, others printed by means of vibrant chromolithography.⁸ Newspapers of the day published reports of extravagant Delmonico meals and banquets, along with gossip about the peccadilloes of regular patrons.⁹ So many articles about the restaurants went out over the telegraph lines that, at some point during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the instantly recognized name of Delmonico became synonymous not only with expensive food but also, importantly, with quality.¹⁰

Of course, this renown spawned copycats across the United States, all of which traded on the Delmonico name. Few, if any, of these ventures were connected to the

Delmonico family. For example, the Delmonico restaurant in Chicago was opened by J.G. Pracht and Joseph Calay in 1866; two years later, the Pullman company's elegant railroad dining car was christened the "Delmonico." At the turn of the century the restaurant Mon Lay Won, advertised as the "Chinese Delmonico," set up business at 24 Pell Street in Manhattan; W.F. Parsons operated the Delmonico Billiards Hall in Galena, Kansas; and Albert B. Schofield of New York invented a new, improved, cast-iron tin-can opener, which he christened "Delmonico."¹¹

The Various Versions of the 1834 Delmonico Menu

But let us return to Delmonico's 1834 menu, this time in another copy (fig. 2, above). Note the fine print at the top of Figure 1, which reads: "This is a photographic reproduction of the first restaurant menu printed in America in 1834 (From the New York Historical Society Collection)." If both Figures 1 and 2 are said to be facsimiles of the original 1834 menu, why are they different? In Figure 2, two lines frame "Delmonico's" at the top, and three lines surround the