

George G. Foster

The Eating-Houses

George G. Foster (1814?–1856) had spent years traveling around the country working on small newspapers before he began to publish his series *New York in Slices* in the *New York Tribune* in 1848. The runaway success of these lively snapshots of city life led promptly to a sequel, *New York by Gas-Light* (1850). “The Eating-Houses” offers a lively picture of the hurly-burly of urban dining in an era when appetites were large, the beef was butchered on Washington Street, and the public eating houses were mostly a man’s domain. Foster fell on hard times later in his career—he served nine months in prison for forgery—and his *New York Times* obituary described him as “a remarkable example of the worthlessness of a brilliant talent unguided by a moral purpose, or a decent regard for the proprieties of civilized society.”



“Beefsteakandtatersvegetábesnumbertwenty–Injinhardandsparrowgrass–numbérssixteen!” “Waiter! Waiter! WA-Y-TER!” “Comingsir”–while the rascal’s *going* as fast as he can! “Is that beef killed for my porterhouse steak I ordered last week?” “Readynminitsir, comingsir, dreklysisir–twonsixpence, biledamand cabbage shillin, ricepudn sixpnce, eithteenpence–at the barf you please–lobstaucensammingnumberfour–yes sir!” Imagine a continuous stream of such sounds as these, about the size of the Croton river, flowing through the banks of clattering plates and clashing knives and forks, perfumed with the steam from a mammoth kitchen, roasting, boiling, baking, frying, beneath the floor–crowds of animals with a pair of jaws apiece, wagging in emulation of the one wielded with such terrific effect by SAMSON–and the thermometer which has become ashamed of itself and hides away behind a mountain of hats in the corner, melting up *by degrees* to boiling heat–and you will have some notion of a New York eating-house. We once undertook to count these establishments in the lower part of the City, but got surfeited on the smell of fried grease before we got half through the first street, and were obliged to go home in a cab. We believe, however, that there can’t be less than a hundred of them within half a mile of the Exchange.

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They are too important a “slice” of New York to be overlooked, and strangers who stop curiosity-hunting after they have climbed the big clock-case at the head of Wall-street, haven’t seen half the sights.

A New York eating-house at high tide is a scene which would well repay the labors of an antiquarian or a panoramist, if its spirit and details could be but half preserved. Every thing is done differently in New York from anywhere else—but in eating the difference is more striking than in any other branch of human economy. A thorough-bred diner-down-town will look at a bill of fare, order his dinner, bolt it and himself, and be engaged in putting off a lot of goods upon a greenhorn, while you are getting your napkin fixed over your nankeens (we think the cotton article preferable) and deciding whether you will take ox-tail or mock-turtle. A regular down-towner surveys the kitchen with his nose as he comes up-stairs—selects his dish by intuition, and swallows it by steam and the electro-galvanic battery. As to digesting it, that is none of his business. He has paid all liabilities to his stomach, and that is all he knows or cares about the matter. The stomach must manage its own affairs—he is not in that “line.”

Not less than thirty thousand persons engaged in mercantile or financial affairs, dine at eating-houses every day. The work commences punctually at twelve; and from that hour until three or four the havoc is immense and incessant. Taylor at Buena Vista was nothing to it. They sweep every thing—not a fragment is left. The fare is generally bad enough—not nearly equal to that which the cook at the Home above Bleecker saves for the beggars, (generally her own thirteen cousins, “just come over.”) It is really wonderful how men of refined tastes and pampered habits, who at home are as fastidious as luxury and a delicate appetite can make them, find it in their hearts—or stomachs either—to gorge such disgusting masses of stringy meat and tepid vegetables, and to go about their business again under the fond delusion that they have dined. But “custom,” they say, does wonders; and it seems that the fear of losing it makes our merchant-princes willing to put up with and put down warm swill in lieu of soup, perspiring joints for delicate *entrées*, and corn meal and molasses instead of *meringues à la crème à la rose*.

There are three distinct classes of eating-houses, and each has its model or type. Linnæus would probably classify them as Sweenyorum, Browniverous,

and Delmonican. The Sweenyorum is but an extension downward of the Browniverous, which we have already described. The chief difference to be noted between the two is, that while at Brown's the waiters *actually do* pass by you within hail now and then, at Sweeney's no such phenomenon ever by any possibility occurs. The room is laid out like the floor of a church, with tables and benches for four, in place of pews. Along the aisles (of Greece, if you judge by the smell) are ranged at "stated" intervals, the attentive waiters, who receive the dishes, small plate sixpnce, large plate shillin, as they are cut off by the man at the helm, and distribute them on either side, with surprising dexterity and precision. Sometimes a nice bit of rosegoose, tender, may be seen flying down the aisle, without its original wings, followed closely in playful sport by a small plate bilebeef, vegetables, until both arrive at their destination; when goose leaps lightly in front of a poet of the Sunday press, who ordered it probably through a commendable preference for a brother of the quill; while the fat and lazy beef dumps itself down with perfect resignation before the "monstrous jaws" of one of the b'hoys, who has just come from a fire in 49th-street, and is hungry, *some!*

At Brown's we get a bill of fare, with the "extras" all honestly marked off and priced at the margin. But at Sweeney's we save our sixpence and dispense with superfluities. The bill of fare is delivered by a man at the door, regularly engaged for that purpose, and is as follows:

Biledlamancapersors.
 Rosebeefrosegoorosemuttonantaters—
 Biledamancabbage, vegetables—
 Walkinsirtakaseatsir.

This is certainly clear and distinct as General Taylor's political opinions, and does away with a great deal of lying in print, to which bills of fare as well as newspapers are too much addicted. The Sweeney, or sixpenny cut, is frequented by a more diversified set of customers than either of the others. It is not impossible to see, here, Professor Bush dining cheek-by-jowl with a hod-man off duty, nor to find a blackleg from Park-row seated opposite the police-officer whose manifest destiny it will be one of these days to take him to quod—unless he should happen to have money enough about him to pay for being let go. The editor, the author, the young lawyer, the publisher,

the ice-cream man round the corner, the poor physician on his way to patients who don't pay, the young student of divinity learning humility at six shillings a week; the journeyman printer on a batter, and afraid to go home to his wife before he gets sober; in short, all classes who go to make up the great middle stripe of population, concentrate and commingle at Sweeney's. Yet all these varied elements never effervesce into any thing in the slightest degree resembling a disturbance; for eating is a serious business—especially when you have but sixpence and no idea whether the next one has been coined.

It is true that Sweeney's "is emphatically a sixpenny eating-house"—but you must take care what you are about, or you may as well have dined at the Astor.—Unless you know how it is done, you will be nicely done yourself. If you indulge in a second piece of bread, a pickle, a bit of cheese, &c., &c., your bill will be summed up to you something after this fashion:—"Clamsoup sixpnce, rosebeef large, shilln, roastchikn eighteen, extra bread three, butter sixpnce, pickle sixpnce, pudn sixpnce, cheese three, claret (logwood and water alumized) two shilln—seven shilln." If you wish to dine cheaply, be contented with a cheap dinner. Call simply for a small plate of roast beef mixed, (this means mashed turnips and potatoes in equal quantities.) After you have eaten this frugal dish,—and it is as much as any one really *needs* for dinner,—you may send for "bread, hard," drink a tumbler of cool Croton, pay one shilling for the whole, and go about your business like a refreshed and sensible man.

There is still another class of eating-houses, which deserve honorable mention—the cake and coffee shops, of which "Butter-cake Dick's" is a favorable sample.—The chief merit of these establishments is that they are kept open all night, and that hungry Editors or belated idlers can get a plate of biscuits with a lump of butter in the belly for three cents, and a cup of coffee for as much more—or he can regale himself on pumpkin pie at four cents the quarter-section, with a cup of Croton, fresh from the hydrant, gratis. The principal supporters of these luxurious establishments, however, are the firemen and the upper circles of the newsboys, who have made a good business during the day, or have succeeded in pummeling some smaller boy and taking his pennies from him. Here, ranged on wooden benches, the butter-cakes and coffee spread ostentatiously before them, and their intelligent faces

supported in the crotch of their joined hands, these autocrats of the press, and the b'hoys, discuss the grave questions as to whether Fourteen was at the fire in Front-street first, or whether it is all gas. Here also are decided in advance the relative merits and speed of the boats entered for the next regatta, and points of great pith and moment in the science of the Ring are definitively settled. As midnight comes and passes, the firemen, those children of the dark, gather from unimaginable places, and soon a panorama of red shirts and brown faces lines the walls and fills the whole area of the little cellar. They are generally far more moderate than politicians and less noisy than gentlemen. At the first tingle of the fire-bell they leap like crouching greyhounds, and are in an instant darting through the street towards their respective engine-houses—whence they emerge dragging their ponderous machines behind them, ready to work like Titans all night and all day, exposing themselves to every peril of life and limb, and performing incredible feats of daring strength, to save the property of people who know nothing about them, care nothing for them, and perhaps will scarcely take the trouble to thank them.

But of all this by itself. The type of eating-house of which we have not spoken is the expensive and aristocratic *restaurant* of which Delmonico's is the only complete specimen in the United States—and this, we have it on the authority of travelled epicures, is equal in every respect, in its appointments and attendance as well as the quality and execution of its dishes, to any similar establishment in Paris itself. We have not left ourselves room in this number to speak in detail of this famous *restaurant*, nor of its *habitués*. It well deserves, however, a separate notice; and a look through its well-filled yet not crowded saloons, and into its admirable *cuisine* will enable us to pass an hour very profitably—besides obtaining a dinner which, as a work of art, ranks with a picture by Huntingdon, a poem by Willis, or a statue by Powers—a dinner which is not merely a quantity of food deposited in the stomach, but is in every sense and to all the senses a great work of art.