



# The Way We Ate

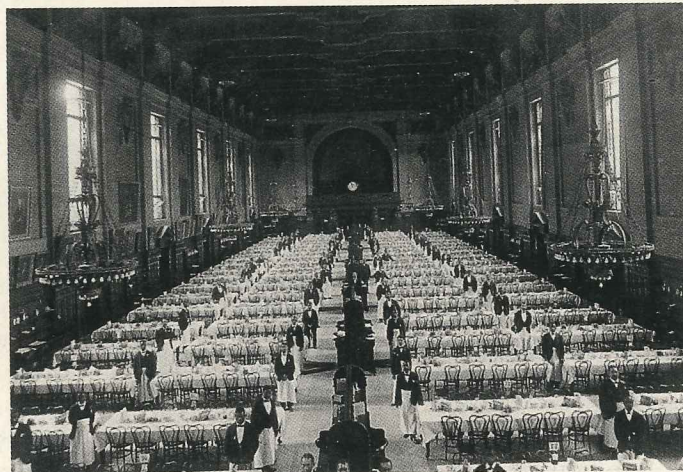
*Undergraduates who “beef” about the Yale food of today should savor a little history.*

Many of the students who are choosing to move off-campus and into New Haven apartments these days cite the quality and delivery of dining hall food as one of the reasons. The University is making a major effort to address the issue, but if history is any guide, even the best of solutions is likely to be temporary.

Institutional food service began at Yale in 1718 with the opening of the first College building in New Haven, and in less than two years the minutes of the Yale Corporation listed “Complaints respecting ye dieting of ye Schollars.” So little progress was made in addressing the issue that in 1721 the young Jonathan Edwards reported to his father that the students had gone on strike over the fare, an action that required the personal intervention of the Rector (as the President was then known), Timothy Cutler, who “so affrighted the scholars that they unanimously agreed to come into commons again.”

Things had evidently improved by 1743, when the Steward was ordered to provide for every four students: one loaf of bread for breakfast; for dinner “2-1/2 pounds of Beef, Veal or Mutton, or 1-3/4 pounds of Salt Pork about twice a Week in the Summer Time, one Quart of Beer, 2 penny Worth of Sauce, and a loaf of bread”; and for supper “2 quarts of milk & one loaf of bread, when milk can conveniently be had, and when it cannot then an Apple-Pye which shall be made of 1-3/4 lb Dough, 1/4 lb Hogs fat, 2 oz Sugar & 1/2 peck of Apples.” He was further ordered to see that “the kitchen & all the Utensils Shall be kept Neat & Sweet.”

These things remained through much of the 19th century. But Samuel F. B. Morse, Class of 1810, reported that cooks were concealing the students’ pies and serving them to their friends at midnight suppers almost every night. In 1828, students staged the great “Bread and Butter Rebellion,” refusing to enter Commons or to attend classes until the faculty met their demands. Four of the leaders were expelled, but after some weeks were readmitted. By 1836, the menu picked up a bit, but



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**Fit for a king: Commons awaits a reunion gathering in 1906.**

according to one student, the eating conditions had not: “We have noise and confusion without end. While the blessing is being asked at one table, there will be rapping, ringing bells, and hollowing for ‘Waiter, waiter,’ at another.”

In 1842, the original Commons was given up and replaced by numerous private eating clubs with such distinctive names as “Frolicsome Oysters” and “Fowl Fiends.” Some became increasingly

exclusive, and in 1866, the College opened an eating club for those who could not afford the private ones. With the construction of the Bicentennial Buildings, in 1901, the present Commons opened adjacent to Woodbridge Hall, providing in baronial surroundings for \$3.25 a week everything but meat or fish, which were ordered a la carte.

Although the fraternity houses had begun to serve meals in the 1920s, their offerings met stiff competition in the 1930s with the opening of the residential colleges. Their majestic dining halls provided an elegant ambience that was matched by the service of waitresses who served each course separately on custom china. A typical menu, for November 18, 1937, lists a choice of broiled loin lamb chops or broiled tenderloin steak. At Timothy Dwight College, it became a tradition at the Christmas dinner for students to march in bearing aloft a suckling pig with an apple in its mouth.

Like everything else, food service was affected by the coming of World War II, which brought in cafeteria service and tin military trays. In 1954, the college china returned, but the cafeteria service remained, and prices began to climb steadily. Many a student at today’s Yale would have trouble believing that the menu in the New Commons Grill Room of the early 1900s offered lobster Newburg for \$.75, broiled lamb chops for \$.50, asparagus tips on toast with drawn butter for \$.35, and pies (all kinds) for \$.10.

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