

Ward McAllister

Success in Entertaining

Samuel Ward McAllister (1827–1895) was the self-appointed arbiter of New York society from the 1860s to the 1890s. Born into a socially prominent judicial family in Savannah, he was a lawyer in California during the Gold Rush before returning East, where he married an heiress and set about fashioning himself into a tastemaker for New York’s old-money circles. His celebrated coinage “The Four Hundred” supposedly derived from the number of people who could fit into Mrs. Astor’s ballroom. McAllister overstepped the line with the publication of his memoir *Society As I Have Found It* (1890), from which this wonderful description of planning a dinner party for the Gilded Age is taken; the Four Hundred felt their privacy had been violated and shunned the author thereafter.

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“We may live without love,—what is passion but pining?
But where is the man who can live without dining?”—

OWEN MEREDITH.

The first object to be aimed at is to make your dinners so charming and agreeable that invitations to them are eagerly sought for, and to let all feel that it is a great privilege to dine at your house, where they are sure they will meet only those whom they wish to meet. You cannot instruct people by a book how to entertain, though Aristotle is said to have applied *his* talents to a compilation of a code of laws for the table. Success in entertaining is accomplished by magnetism and tact, which combined constitute social genius. It is the ladder to social success. If successfully done, it naturally creates jealousy. I have known a family who for years outdid every one in giving exquisite dinners—(this was when this city was a small community)—driven to Europe and passing the rest of their days there on finding a neighbor outdoing them. I myself once lost a charming friend by giving a better soup than he did. His wife rushed home from my house, and in despair, throwing up her hands to her husband, exclaimed, “Oh! what a soup!” I related this to

my cousin, the distinguished *gourmet*, who laughingly said: "Why did you not at once invite them to pork and beans?"

The highest cultivation of social manners enables a person to conceal from the world his real feelings. He can go through any annoyance as if it were a pleasure; go to a rival's house as if to a dear friend's; "Smile and smile, yet murder while he smiles." A great compliment once paid me in Newport was the speech of an old public waiter, who had grown gray in the service, when to a *confrère* he exclaimed: "In this house, my friend, you meet none but quality."

In planning a dinner the question is not to whom you owe dinners, but who is most desirable. The success of the dinner depends as much upon the company as the cook. Discordant elements—people invited alphabetically, or to pay off debts—are fatal. Of course, I speak of ladies' dinners. And here, great tact must be used in bringing together young womanhood and the dowagers. A dinner wholly made up of young people is generally stupid. You require the experienced woman of the world, who has at her fingers' ends the history of past, present, and future. Critical, scandalous, with keen and ready wit, appreciating the dinner and wine at their worth. Ladies in beautiful toilets are necessary to the elegance of a dinner, as a most exquisitely arranged table is only a solemn affair surrounded by black coats. I make it a rule never to attend such dismal feasts, listening to prepared witticisms and "twice-told tales." So much for your guests.

The next step is an interview with your *chef*, if you have one, or *ordon bleu*, whom you must arouse to fever heat by working on his ambition and vanity. You must impress upon him that this particular dinner will give him fame and lead to fortune. My distinguished cousin, who enjoyed the reputation of being one of the most finished *gourmets* in this country, when he reached this point, would bury his head in his hands and (seemingly to the *chef*) rack his brain seeking inspiration, fearing lest the fatal mistake should occur of letting two white or brown sauces follow each other in succession; or truffles appear twice in that dinner. The distress that his countenance wore as he repeatedly looked up at the *chef*, as if for advice and assistance, would have its intended effect on the culinary artist, and *his* brain would at once act in sympathy.

The first battle is over the soup, and here there is a vast difference of opinion. In this country, where our servants are oftentimes unskilled, and have a charming habit of occasionally giving ladies a soup shower bath, I invariably discard two soups, and insist to the protesting *chef* that there shall be but one. Of course, if there are two, the one is light, the other heavy. Fortunately for the period in which we live, our great French artists have invented the *Tortue claire*, which takes the place of our forefathers' Mock Turtle soup, with forcemeat balls, well spiced, requiring an ostrich's digestion to survive it. We have this, then, as our soup. The *chef* here exclaims, "Monsieur must know that all *petites bouchées* must, of necessity, be made of chicken." We ask for a novelty, and his great genius suggests, under pressure, *mousse aux jambon*, which is attractive to the eye, and, if well made, at once establishes the reputation of the artist, satisfies the guests that they are in able hands, and allays their fears for their dinner.

There is but one season of the year when salmon should be served hot at a choice repast; that is in the spring and early summer, and even then it is too satisfying, not sufficiently delicate. The man who gives salmon during the winter, I care not what sauce he serves with it, does an injury to himself and his guests. Terrapin is with us as national a dish as canvasback, and at the choicest dinners is often a substitute for fish. It is a shellfish, and an admirable change from the oft repeated *filet de sole* or *filet de bass*. At the South, terrapin soup, with plenty of eggs in it, was a dish for the gods, and a standard dinner party dish in days when a Charleston and Savannah dinner was an event to live for. But no Frenchman ever made this soup. It requires the native born culinary genius of the African.

Now when we mention the word terrapin, we approach a very delicate subject, involving a rivalry between two great cities; a subject that has been agitated for thirty years or more, and is still agitated, i.e. the proper way of cooking terrapin. The Baltimoreans contending that the black stew, the chafing dish system, simply adding to the terrapin salt, pepper, and Madeira, produce the best dish; while the Philadelphians contend that by fresh butter and cream they secure greater results. The one is known as the Baltimore black stew; the other, as the Trenton stew, this manner of cooking terrapin originating in an old eating club in Trenton, N.J. I must say I agree with the Philadelphians.

And now, leaving the fish, we come to the *pièce de resistance* of the dinner, called the *relève*. No Frenchman will ever willingly cook a ladies' dinner and give anything coarser or heavier than a *filet de bœuf*. He will do it, if he has to, of course, but he will think you a barbarian if you order him to do it. I eschew the mushroom and confine myself to the truffle in the treatment of the *filet*. I oftentimes have a *filet à la mœlle de bœuf*, or *à la jardinière*. In the fall of the year, turkey *poults à la Bordelaise*, or *à la Toulouse*, or a saddle of Southdown mutton or lamb, are a good substitute. Let me here say that the American turkey, as found on Newport Island, all its feathers being jet black and its diet grasshoppers, is exceptionally fine.

Now for the *entrées*. In a dinner of twelve or fourteen, one or two hot *entrées* and one cold is sufficient. If you use the truffle with the *filet*, making a black sauce, you must follow it with a white sauce, as a *riz de veau à la Toulouse*, or a *suprême de volaille*; then a *chaud-froid*, say of *pâté de foie gras en Bellevue*, which simply means *pâté de foie gras* incased in jelly. Then a hot vegetable, as artichokes, sauce *Barigoule*, or *Italienne*, or asparagus, sauce *Hollandaise*. Then your *sorbet*, known in France as *la surprise*, as it is an ice, and produces on the mind the effect that the dinner is finished, when the grandest dish of the dinner makes its appearance in the shape of the roast canvasbacks, woodcock, snipe, or truffled capons, with salad.

I must be permitted a few words of and about this *sorbet*. It should never be flavored with rum. A true Parisian *sorbet* is simply "*punch à la Toscane*," flavored with *Maraschino* or bitter almonds; in other words, a homœopathic dose of prussic acid. Then the *sorbet* is a digestive, and is intended as such. *Granit*, or water ice, flavored with rum, is universally given here. Instead of aiding digestion, it impedes it, and may be dangerous.

A Russian salad is a pleasing novelty at times, and is more attractive if it comes in the shape of a *Macedoine de legumes*, Camembert cheese, with a biscuit, with which you serve your Burgundy, your old Port, or your Johannisberg, the only place in the dinner where you can introduce this latter wine. A genuine Johannisberg, I may say here, by way of parenthesis, is rare in this country, for if obtained at the Chateau, it is comparatively a dry wine; if it is, as I have often seen it, still lusciously sweet after

having been here twenty years or more, you may be sure it is not a genuine Chateau wine.

The French always give a hot pudding, as pudding *suedoise*, or a *croute au Madère*, or *ananas*, but I always omit this dish to shorten the dinner. Then come your ices. The fashion now is to make them very ornamental, a *cornucopia* for instance, but I prefer a *pouding Nesselrode*, the best of all the ices if good cream is used.