

Foods for Moods

New scientific research has shown the mood of family dinners can be dramatically improved by serving Pepperidge Farm Garlic Bread. Dr. Alan R. Hirsch, director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago, has published an important study on "The Effect of the Smell and Taste of Pepperidge Farm Garlic Bread on Family Interactions." Two identical spaghetti dinners were served to 50 families, but only half were given the garlic bread. The results: "Researchers found that eating Pepperidge Farm Garlic Bread reduced the number of negative family interactions by 22.7 percent and increased the number of pleasant interactions by 7.4 percent." From this he calculated that for a family of four, a serving of the Pepperidge Farm product "results in thirty-one fewer negative interactions and forty-five more positive interactions per dinner." Now that's real science. Dr. Hirsch's research was made possible by funding from Campbell Soup (owners of guess who), showing once again the importance of corporate involvement. (Harper's 5/99, p.12)

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Celebrating cutting edge advances in the Doublethink of the 90's
Written by Wayne Grytting #116

THERE'S something here we've been neglecting. We give prizes to the authors of cookbooks whose recipes have pleased the palate; but what of their effects on social intercourse? This should be a subject for extensive scientific research. What was served for dinner at Yalta or Reykjavik or Dumbarton Oaks may have affected the course of human history. (I cite only modern examples, from which the menus may well survive.)

We must think seriously about the physiology of our favorite cuisines. Do hot curries exacerbate the conflict between India and Pakistan? Does the social stability of Scandinavia owe anything to the reassuringly bland and uncorrupted generosity of a smorgasbord? American cuisine is too varied to generalize from, but fiery chili con carne and comforting clam chowder could provide clues to the bellicose Texan and the taciturn Cape Codder.

Foods may have effects which contradict expectation. What is more pacifying than sugar? And yet, as my wife Mary observed over and over in the classroom, excessive consumption can lead to hyperactivity (the official term for horrible behavior). And the harmless peanut, after appearing unannounced in so many commercial foods prepared especially for children, can now produce an allergy which may kill with only a trace. As manufacturers dose us with unknown additives, mystery writers will have a whole new range of apparently innocent poisons at their disposal.

SEVERAL years ago I had an experience which took all this out of the realm of tongue-in-cheek conjecture. I spent a couple of weeks at a summer festival of concerts and workshops on the island of Biskops Arno a few miles north of Stockholm. It was densely wooded with tall pines and the buildings were made of darkly stained wood which seemed to have grown directly out of the soil. The atmosphere of the festival reflected the natural harmony within which it took place: performers from all over the world settled into the extended family and attended each others' concerts with enthusiastic interest. (It was there that my own vocal quartet, Electric Phoenix, and the now-legendary Kronos Quartet first heard each other and formed an attachment which led to a commissioned joint repertoire and two seasons of concerts in Europe and America.)

I had arrived with a newly developed surround sound microphone and playback system. The festival engineers, instead of regarding me with envy or suspicion, allowed me to record the entire festival, gave me a room of my own across the hall, and frequently came over to hear the results.

The food was glorious. In the morning we came down to a large sunny dining room with a buffet of various mueslis accompanied by a range of milks, yoghurts and smetanas. There were rich dense homemade breads, together with various local cheeses and half-a-dozen varieties of pickled herring with onion rings, mustard sauce, sweetened vinegar, or sour cream. And then croissants and Danish pastries, and all so delicious that you wanted to start over at the other end of the table and keep going 'til sundown. "Tell me, why do you only serve one meal a day?" as the old joke says. But there were meals aplenty and all up to the same healthy mouth-watering standard.

A COUPLE of months later I moved on to Darmstadt. This is the biennial two-week marathon of avant-garde music which was established just after WWII by Karlheinz Stockhausen and has since then included virtually every modern composer of any importance. Aspiring young composers and performers come here to study and to be heard. As the final concerts and the prize-giving approach, the pace accelerates and the competition for performing time and musicians becomes hysterical—the concert halls are transformed into Darwinian struggle pits.

That year a number of musician friends wanted to make use of my sound system. The house technicians, who had supplied the equipment from the early years, were always overworked and so one might have expected them to welcome a bit of free help. Instead, they became insanely jealous and threatened to go away, never to return. What a total contrast in attitude, I thought, of both the musicians and the engineers. What was the explanation?

And then a possible answer was forced upon me. At Darmstadt I had always ignored the food, which was for the most part unspeakable. The festival took place in a local high school, and the cafeteria, staffed by the school cooks, supplied our meals. The dining hall was long, echoing and virtually windowless, with a harshly reverberant acoustic that turned all conversation into a shouting match. The meals consisted largely of frozen trays reheated in the oven, containing the sort of grim sludge one associates with the army or with Aeroflot. That summer I could ignore them no longer. After a day they sent me irrevocably to bed.

During my second day of starvation I became interested again in the idea of food, but not—God help me!—a return to what had laid me out. Around the corner from my hotel was a greengrocer with a beautiful assortment of ripe fresh fruits; next door was a health food shop that made a dozen crunchy varieties of its own muesli and sold fresh milk and yoghurt to go with it. Eagerly I stocked up on the nectar and ambrosia of which I had been deprived and took it back to my room, where I emptied the mini-bar of its expensive beer and Coke and put the perishables out of harm's way.

From then on I had breakfast in the hotel, which was quite passable, and took my other meals with me to the high school, where I ate them outside on the lawn under shady trees, together with a few others who couldn't abide the din. Life was back to normal.

What a depressing way to satisfy one's most basic physical need! These young musicians, during some of their most impressionable and demanding days, were storing away the raw materials of dissent, sickness, conflict, and aggression. How could one make music out of such ugly and disparate elements, unless it were a music of confusion, discord and despair? I remembered that sunny dining room in Biskops Arno. What if this seminal Darmstadt festival, which had molded the music of post-war Europe, had been miraculously transplanted to that happy isle, and its participants "on honeydew had fed and drunk the milk of paradise"? Karlheinz Stockhausen might be remembered for his mellifluous harmonies, Luciano Berio for his sweet disposition and his generous encouragement of struggling musicians. The entire history of post-war avant-garde music—and with it life itself—might have been transformed.