Drinking and Dining à la Russe in the Long Nineteenth Century

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From the late 1850s until the eve of World War 1, the dominant British habit amongst the ‘dinner-giving grades’ was to dine ‘à la Russe’. In the words of cookery writer Phyllis Browne in 1885, the ‘difference between the old-fashioned dinner and the dinner à la Russe is that in the first all the dishes are put upon the table and carved by the host or his representative, and in the latter the food is not put on the table at all, but is handed round by servants’ (Newcastle Courant, 26 June 1885, p.6). Though this style was relatively formalised it was nonetheless invented and reinvented with each succeeding generation during the nineteenth century and with each re-invention came changes to the style and service of wine—the subject of this paper.

Though a number of scholars have touched on the impact of the switch to the à la Russe style, only Kaufman has focused on it, arguing that it prioritised diners as ‘audience’ for a pre-conceived meal orchestrated by the hostess who organised the food, rather than as ‘participants’ who chose their own meal from a range of possible dishes (Kaufman, 2002, pp.123–33). This paper builds on Kaufman’s work but draws largely on contemporary reports in newspapers and journals and on the etiquette manuals published in the nineteenth century which concerned themselves with the dinner party; that ‘peculiarly British phenomenon’ (Tombs and Tombs, 2006, p.421).

The importance of the dinner party was that it provided a place for entertainment within the home at a period when women’s ability to visit places of public entertainment became increasingly limited after the 1850s and before the liberalization of the 1880s and 1890s when visiting restaurants became socially acceptable for women (see Newnham-Davis, 1899, passim). Access to the home was controlled by ‘sophisticated rituals’ (Bailey, 1998, pp.17–18). The mistress of the household took on the role of the ‘social general’ in managing both the tea ceremony in the entirely feminine drawing room and the dinner party in the rather more contested area of the dining room (Langland, 1995, pp.40–43). As Davidoff has noted, the dinner party was the ‘apogee of the social day’, a forum for sociability, business manoeuvring and marital negotiation (Davidoff, 1986, p.47).

The early history of the à la Russe style in Britain is unclear. Though there were scattered references in the 1810s and 1820s, it was apparently ‘adopted by a few high families’ in the 1830s (Notes and Queries, 25 May 1872, p.422). By the late 1850s and early 1860s, Punch was not only noting how much had been written ‘recently’ on the topic but adding its own jokes and poems (4 January 1862, p.10). Throughout the 1860s, magazines and newspapers itemised its advantages and disadvantages and jewellers and chinaware producers advertised appropriate table decorations (Ladies Treasury, 1 April 1868 for decorations, p.50; Sporting Gazette, 13 February 1864, p.126 for silverware).

The structure of the à la Russe dinner was formalized by the 1860s, though separate elements underwent modification throughout the century. As a ‘locus of socioeconomic display’ in a socially-anxious society, the dinner table was a space where ‘rules shifted constantly’ (Hyman, 2009, p.3). A constant feature was that food was no longer carved at the table by the host but carved at a side-table by a servant and thence ‘handed’ to the guests. The second constant element was the presence of elaborate table decorations. In the 1860s, these were typically of silver (even gold) or porcelain. The Lady’s Newspaper in 1862 advertised a ‘table fountain’ which threw a tiny jet of perfumed water (23 May 1862, p.560). By the 1880s and 1890s, the emphasis had switched to flowers and greenery which were presented as ‘cooler’, less costly and scenting the room more delicately (Milom Gazette, 19 August 1898, p.6).

This same article presented as a novelty the practice of supplementing the floral decorations with the dessert dishes (‘sweetmeats, devilled almonds and other novelties’), although this had been the subject of the 1862 Punch poem cited above in which the eponymous ‘rustic’ decides that the latest fashion must be to start with dessert and peels an apple before the waiter arrives with soup.

The structure of the meal was largely unvaried in principle though its composition began to change significantly in the 1880s. Soup (two kinds) was followed by fish (three or four dishes), then entreés (or hot ‘made dishes’). Removes (joints of meat) were followed by roasts (usually game), then vegetable dishes and finally cheese and dessert. Most such meals had 20 to 30 different dishes (illustration of Hussars menus). The number of dishes was ‘amplified’ for larger parties and ‘proportionately reduced’ for smaller events but there was always a ‘menu card’ to enable the diner to make his or her ‘plan of campaign’ (Gouffé, 1868, p.221). By the 1890s, a ‘small dinner’ composed only 6-8 dishes with only one (or at most two) per category (Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough, 16 May 1900, p.4).

Though the merits of this style were initially contested, from the 1870s onwards there was general agreement on its (many) advantages and (few) disadvantages. The principal advantages proposed by commentators were that despite the number of dishes it was more economical since there was less waste. For example, the hostess did not have to present a whole salmon on the table of which half would go to the servants but could budget for a precise number of guests. It made the room cleaner and cooler since there...
were no ‘smoking joints and steaming preparations’ that raised the temperature and left smells of cooking fat and burnt meat. Handed dishes meant ‘no stretching over guests’ and the use of servants meant that the hosts could concentrate on their guests and the conversation—to the extent that this writer could claim in 1885 that dinner could now become ‘an intellectual recreation’ (Newcastle Courant, 26 June 1885, p.6).

But there were problems and disadvantages. Most important of these was the need—in most households—to find and hire competent waiting staff. The general rule was that one servant was needed for every four guests (though skilled servants could manage six guests). Skill lacking, the result was ‘confusion and chaos’ and the probability that the (hired-in) ‘greengrocer has warmed the sherry and iced the claret’ (All the Year Round, 31 March 1877, p.6). A few in the 1860s deplored the disappearance of whole joints of meat and complained that ‘the table is altogether stripped of wine, and the guests are at the mercy of butlers or paid waiters, who use the wine either for their private drinking after the dinner in the servants’ hall, or of hosts who, to save their wine, would stint their guests’ (Kirwan, 1864, p.96).

The shift to service à la Russe had more significant implications for the style and service of wine than the fear of drunken butlers (though this was an accepted occupational hazard of the profession). With the shift to a formalized menu came a more directive deployment of wine. In the 1830s and probably well into the 1850s, the choice of wine was that of the individual guests. Etiquette for the Ladies (Anonymous, 1837, p.37) shows that though some pairings had been formalized by that time (e.g. champagne with whitebait), a range of wines was usually handed round between each course. With the introduction of the à la Russe style this changed. With soup, there was sherry; with the fish, Chablis or hock. With the ‘entrees’ came champagne, then burgundy (or claret) with the game before Madeira and claret (and up until the 1880s, port) with the desserts (Cassell & Co. 1883–4, p.262).

Taken together, these changes represented a major shift in the culinary taste regime. A ‘taste regime’ is defined as a system that ‘orchestrates practice in an aesthetically oriented culture of consumption’ (Arsel and Bean, 2013, p.899).

The nineteenth-century à la Russe dinner party was not a cult of consumption’ (Arsel and Bean, 2013, p.899). As champagne became a dry wine, so it became increasingly dominant at the dinner table. By the beginning of the 1880s this formalization had taken place, and by the 1870s (if not earlier) there was a fashion for champagne-only dinners (Ottomeyer, 2011, p.139). John Galsworthy (the son of a wine merchant), writing in 1908, but describing a dinner of the 1880s, had his fictional Forsyte family drink nothing but champagne after a sole glass of sherry with the soup (Galsworthy, 1970, pp.24, 32, 97).

By the beginning of the 1880s this formalization had begun to be called into question. An 1880 article on ‘Dinner Wines’ from the Queen magazine lamented the ‘poverty of invention’ evinced by the ‘constant recurrence’ of champagne at the dinner table (cited in Shields Daily Gazette, 26 January 1880, p.4). In 1899, the wine merchant and author, Louis Feuillerand, expressed his ‘hope that this fashion will soon die out, because the drinking of dry champagne with all kinds of food is not commendable’ (Feuillerand, 1899, p.61). As dinners shortened so the number of wines served began to diminish. The Western Times reported (8 November 1890, p.2) on the ‘simplification of the wine list’; hock and claret were deemed sufficient for small dinners and the fashion for champagne as a domestic dinner wine began to diminish—though not disappear (Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough, 16 May 1900, p.4).

The linkage of specific wines to specific foods extended to the glassware—one of the several impacts of the à la Russe style on the material culture of the table. The fashion
for different types of wine reinforced (may indeed have created) the Victorian preference for an array of different shapes, sizes and colours of wine glass on the dinner table. Knowledge of which glass to use for which wine became an essential element in the social knowledge of younger and less experienced drinkers. Until the mid-1850s, glassware firms did not have extensive catalogues of products; these emerged in parallel with the switch to à la Russe and its insistence on specific wines for each course (Wolfenden, 1995, p.44).

Styles of glassware changed during the period from 1850 to 1914, reflecting less changes in the choice of wine than the broader desire for innovation reflected in changing fashions. Thus, coloured glassware become popular in the 1880s. Hock glasses might be blue, green, ruby or pale golden brown (Girl's Own Paper, 14 November 1885, p.105); claret glasses were generally white (though occasionally tinted) whilst there was a fashion for gold-decorated champagne glasses with extremely tall stems in the early 1900s (Dundee Evening Telegraph, 27 October 1902, p.6).

The changes in the material culture of wine reflect the role of the dinner table as a marker of social status. Elaborate sets of glassware, fine dishes (particularly for the sweetmeats displayed on the table), and the quality of the table decorations were marks of both cultural and financial capital. Although articles on creating low-cost decorations were not uncommon (see, for example, The Woman's Signal, 6 February 1896, p.2 for a how-to guide on decoration with only flowers and brocade), the consensus of contemporaries was evident. The à la Russe style was a manifestation of wealth and luxury. In 1865, the Walsall Free Press (3 June 1865, p.2), commenting on the number prizes being offered by Horticultural Societies for the best 'à la Russe' table decorations as 'a noteworthy sign as marking the increased luxury of the age'. Or, as the Millom Gazette put it in 1898 (19 August 1898, p.2), 'we have increased our expenditure in nearly every department of life, and in nothing is this more apparent than in the service and appointments of the dinner table'. As Elizabeth Langland emphasized: 'dinner staged status' (Langland, 1995, p.40).

Ridley's Wine and Spirit Circular (12 January 1872, p.32), whilst concurring in 1872 that '[n]owadays, all is show' expressed their fear that whilst contemporary food and table decoration were 'of the most excellent quality', the quality of the wine was being neglected. For the journal, 'the falling off [in wine quality] more than balances the superiority of the modern Menu; we, even we, have had put before us such pitiful stuff, to wash down excellent fare, in the shape of Champagne and Sherry, as should provide a California to the vendor at 2 4s a dozen'. By this date, premium champagnes were retreating at between 45 to 90s a dozen. No doubt they had a dog in that particular fight, but their concerns were echoed in other daily newspapers which suggested that the expressed preference for dry champagne had far more to do with social pretence than hedonic preference. In 1885, the London Standard wrote in reference to dry wine that 'it is astonishing how people get reconciled to drinking anything, provided it be the fashion to do so' (quoted in Ridley's, 12 June 1885, p.238).

The 'cult' of dry wine, as the trade journal the Caterer termed it (Ridley's, 12 August 1892, p.451) was driven by the need to display. Champagne, unlike most other wines which were decanted, was always served from the bottle with the label visible and, as Ridley's commented, the consumers 'must be able to call their Wine a crack brand of a crack vintage'. Quality, added the journal, was a 'secondary consideration' to most consumers (Ridley's, 12 April 1893, p.217).

Champagne became strongly associated not just with the functionality of the à la Russe style but also the performance of sociability. The Dundee Evening Telegraph (26 September 1907, p.6), writing of the 'change in English manners', argued that 'all recent changes [in dinner parties] have tended to the relaxation of formality [and that] stiffness is next to impossible with the dinner à la Russe, with dishes carved on the sideboards, and with a perennial flow of champagne. There is a sense of sweetness and light; the flowers favour têtes-à-têtes, and the scents inspire flirtations'.

But the stage of sociability was shifting by 1907. The dinner à la Russe had removed one layer of anxiety from the host and hostess by reducing the guest's choice and freedom of action. The menu card dictated the choices available to the diners. No longer were second helpings considered socially acceptable (Newcastle Courant, 26 June 1885, p.6). Guests were no longer expected to serve their companions. But anxieties remained. Would the cook perform; would the waiters play their part? As the agent for Moët & Chandon champagne, André Simon, wrote: the public 'prefer the certainty of a well-served meal to the possible vagaries of their cook, and who prefer the inclusive charge of the restaurant to the worry, trouble, expensive and probable mishaps of a big dinner at home' (Simon 1905, pp.152–53). For the Country Gentleman (26 March 1898, p.404), society was approaching the point when 'all dinners will be taken out'. The hostess, the magazine wrote, has 'only to fix the hour and day when her guests are to assemble at one of the perfectly appointed restaurants with which London abounds'.

Note 'her guests'. The change to à la Russe changed the balance of gender around the table in several ways. Though the dining room itself was initially seen as a masculine space, it was the hostess who directed the theatre of dinner (Hamlett, 2010, p.41). Margaret Oliphant's enormously successful mid-century novel Miss Marjoribanks made very clear that, in provincial as in London society, the hostess was the social animator of the local community; even when as in Lucilla Marjoribanks's case, she was the young daughter of a widowed doctor. The dozens of 'Thursday evening' dinners she orchestrates in the course of the novel rescue her father from loneliness and re-animate the fictional Carlingford (Oliphant, 1969).

At the dinner table, the evolution of the table decoration away from displays of massive plate to flowers and greenery put greater stress on the aesthetic sense of the hostess—as a number of 'Ladies Columns' in the newspapers of the late...
century reflected (Falkirk Evening Herald, 8 December 1897, p.2). The host continued to be responsible for wine but he lost his role as the chief carver—previously seen as a central to the gentleman’s armoury of social skills—and (as we have seen) carving skills no longer dominated conversation. Though young women were often expected to be reserved and shy when they first made the transition from the school room to the dining room, it was clear that they were expected to develop the social and conversational capital needed to become successful wives and hostesses in their own right; in this, champagne was seen (rightly or wrongly) as an animating force. As the journalist and wine writer Henry Vizetelly observed of a dinner party, champagne transformed the monosyllabic responses of the ‘young lady just out’ into ‘an astounding aptness for repartee’ (Vizetelly, 1882, p.262).

The switch to restaurant dining made the display of financial and social capital yet more visible on the table. Very occasional references to ‘dinner à la Russe’ (in the sense used in this paper) continued at least until the 1930s (see Leeds Mercury, 2 March 1936, p.8). The switch to restaurants was strengthened by the trend amongst the British elite to live not in houses with cellars but in mansion flats where, as Ridley’s (12 September 1899, p.621) observed, there was no more wine space in West End flats than the ‘homely cupboard’. After 1919, cartoons of restaurant tables with conspicuous champagne ice-pails, bottles and glasses replaced the domestic tables—whether grand or humble—that had dominated the visual representation of dining in the nineteenth century.

Not only did the practise of dining à la Russe collapse after the first decade of the twentieth century but so too did the dinner party habit—at least as measured by newspaper mentions. In the period 1850–1909, there were, on average, over 2,800 references to ‘dinner party’ in articles and advertisements every year in the British Newspaper Archive database of provincial and national newspapers (https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk). From 1910 onwards, this figure fell to around 1000 per year until 1939. A Google ngram analysis (https://books.google.com/ngrams) supports this apparent decline which was not reversed until well after the end of World War II.

The question in a headline in the Nottingham Evening Post (10 April 1950, p.3) was ‘What has killed the dinner party?’ The answer, according to journalist Ruth Bowley, was not lack of food or money but ‘because the wives are too tired to do the work’. Women’s work was central to the nineteenth-century dinner à la Russe. Their social, managerial and aesthetic labour made the dinner party: disrupting, re-creating and feminizing nineteenth-century sociability.

Reference List

Newspapers and periodicals
All the Year Round, 31 March 1877, p.6, 104.
Country Gentleman, 26 March 1898, p.404.