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Automat for the People

A look at American dining at the turn of the century.

MELANIE REHAK

Stained-glass facade of the Horn & Hardart Automat, New York.

I have always been inordinately fond of things with moving parts—pinball machines, record players, those clocks and watches in which you can see the gears and sprockets turning as the seconds tick away. As such, one of my great regrets in life is that I was born in Manhattan after the heyday of the Automat. That combination of food and simple machinery is like a holy grail for me. Looking for a little fix last summer, I lingered, far longer than it would have taken to eat an entire meal at an actual Automat, at the Horn & Hardart coin-activated metal compartments on display at the New York Public Library's "Lunch Hour" exhibit. All those shining slots and knobs and hinges had a sad, hypnotic effect on me—paradise lost—and when I wandered out into the haze of midtown, I couldn't think where I might eat that wouldn't pale in comparison to what once had been.

My feeling of urban lunchtime hopelessness, I have now discovered, was neither unique nor new. In the sumptuous ***Repast: Dining Out at the Dawn of the New American Century, 1900–1910* (Norton, $26)**, Michael Lesy and Lisa Stoffer refer to this midday malaise as "the problem of lunch." Their book makes clear, along with many other things about the way we ate then, that soul-crushingly bad noontime meal options have been a long-standing feature of the American workday. That they manage to make discussions of awful meals both charming and interesting is in no small part due to *Repast*'s kaleidoscopic mix of contemporary news stories, research, and gorgeous reproductions of menus from the era, festooned with illustrations of everything from bluebirds to rakish swimmers (also courtesy of the New York Public Library, whose Buttolph Menu Collection would be worth a visit, if only I could think of somewhere nearby to have lunch afterward).

But enough about that: Let's talk about turn-of-the-century food. It was frequently terrible, at least for the common man (though the 1 percent, needless to say, were dining on sirloin in their companies' executive dining rooms nationwide). As food wagons and cheap lunch counters sprang up all over cities, workers traded in their traditional lunch pails for hot meals and a host of issues, both gastronomic and economic. To begin with, there was all that rushing around in order to eat within the allotted half hour: "When the whistle blows, the workmen drop their tools before the first blast dies away and dash . . . to the street in search of food," ran one 1903 article in the *Chicago Tribune*. This, combined with the subsequent shoveling in of said food, led to what was quaintly referred to in those days as "dyspepsia," which reached far beyond the blue-collar set as lunch-counter culture took over. "The Prevalence of 'The American Disease'—dyspepsia—is largely due to the quick lunch habit of our businessmen and women," wrote the *New York Times*. "The inferior food, catch-as-catch-can service, the noise, the hurry, even the heavy, permanent odor of the average quick lunch restaurant, all conspire against good digestion." In what has to be one of the only instances of women being advised against matrimony in the early 1900s on culinary grounds, the *Chicago Tribune* suggested women should avoid marrying men with the dreaded "quick lunch habit" given their generally foul, indigestion-induced tempers, which they were bound to exercise on their unsuspecting wives.

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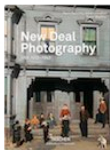

DOING
TONIGHT?

they were bound to exercise on their unsuspecting wives.

The second part of the lunch problem arose on the other side of the counter, where waiters were paid far less than other workers. Customers, meanwhile, were outraged about tipping, which they saw as involuntary compensation for the low wages paid by employers. A series of unionizing efforts and strikes followed, first by white male waiters, then, most notably in Chicago in 1903, by African American waiters (who made even less than their white counterparts), and finally, in 1910, by the waitresses who had been hired to replace them at still lower wages. Not one of these was successful, but some restaurant owners took notice and decided to simplify where possible. Enter—ta-da!—the Automat.

Horn & Hardart, my dear departed, began in Philadelphia and went on to become a successful chain. (Joseph Horn, a well-to-do Philadelphian, met Frank Hardart, a poor German immigrant who'd spent his life cooking and doing dishes at cheap restaurants, after Hardart responded to Horn's newspaper ad looking for a partner. His note, written on the torn-off corner of a sugar bag, read, "I'm your man." Obviously, I have just added never meeting the two of them to my list of life's regrets.) They started with traditional lunchrooms, which became wildly successful in part because of Hardart's recipe for French drip coffee. When a representative from a German Automat company named Quissana came calling with plans for a "waiterless restaurant," Hardart took a trip back to his native country and purchased, for a sum equivalent to $750,000 today, a "Quissana machine." The pair opened their new eatery in Philadelphia in 1902, and the city's *Evening Bulletin* swooned: "The horseless carriage, the wireless telephone, and the playerless piano have been surpassed. . . . Artistically [the Automat] is a glittering . . . combination of plate glass, marble tiling, weathered oak wainscoting, and hammered brass fittings. Practically, it is a boon to thousands of hungry businessmen and women."

Now—about those businesswomen. They, too, partook of the pleasures of Automats everywhere they cropped up. (No slouches, Horn and Hardart soon replaced Quissana's merely functional beverage spigots with "dolphin-headed spouts, copied, in miniature, from a fountain Horn had seen in the ruins of Pompeii while on vacation.") But women had their own special lunch problem, pressed upon them by social codes that hadn't caught up with the times. They were better educated than ever before, and many had office jobs, but they were still wary of eating alone in public, because they were often made to feel downright unwelcome. As the authors note, "Unless the lunchroom made a point of offering separate facilities for men and women, a crowded quick lunch could mean rubbing shoulders with staring male strangers." In response, they formed women's-only lunch clubs that charged a monthly membership fee and provided hot, high-quality lunches. Soda fountains proliferated (hello, Schrafft's), and eventually many big companies and stores began to open separate dining rooms within their buildings to feed the female operators, stenographers, secretaries, and salesgirls in their employ. Meanwhile, tearooms sprang up in department stores and elsewhere for leisure-class ladies who also were getting out on their own more often. Many of these establishments capitalized on the new taste for ethnic and immigrant cultures that was also having a huge effect on the way urban Americans ate out in those days, decorating their dining rooms with Japanese or Dutch or "Oriental" themes. Wise to the ways of both the world and business by now, female college graduates began moving back to the towns where they'd gone to school, at places like Smith and Wellesley, and opening successful tearooms of their own.

Of course, then, as now (and always), there were people out to impress with their food. Lesy and Stoffer tell at pleasing length of utterly over-the-top feasts and balls thrown by the nation's upper crust—the endangered terrapin and out-of-season fruits and elaborate ice-cream bombes. They are lively and illuminating on this crowd as well. One photo in particular of no fewer than one hundred men in white tie sitting around a claustrophobic, shrubbery-covered banquet table suggests its own story about issues of gender, class, and service that the authors touch on.

But my heart, as you know, lies elsewhere, with those humble pieces of pie and cups of good, strong coffee that could be bought for a nickel or two by twirling a knob and opening a little door, and I know I'm not the only one. Walter Winchell was a fan, and Irving Berlin memorialized Automats in the 1932 musical *Face the Music* with songs like "Let's Have Another Cup of Coffee" and "I Say It's Spinach (And the Hell with It)." But even long after New York had evolved from gaiety to grit, the Automat maintained its place in the city's long-running romantic narrative of young men and women arriving with little more than creativity, high hopes, and a few coins in their pockets. In her brilliant, dreamy recollection of Manhattan in the 1960s and '70s, *Just Kids*, Patti Smith describes a rainy afternoon in 1969 when she was longing for a specific, reliable cheese-and-lettuce sandwich from the Horn & Hardart on West Twenty-Third Street, "the queen of Automats." She put on her cap and coat, headed out, and then kismet struck:

> I got my tray and slipped in my coins but the window wouldn't open. I tried again without luck and then I noticed the price had gone up to sixty-five cents. I was disappointed to say the least, when I heard a voice say, "Can I help?"
>
> I turned around and it was Allen Ginsberg. . . . Allen added the extra dime and also stood me to a cup of coffee. I wordlessly followed him to his table, and then plowed into the sandwich. . . .
>
> He was talking about Walt Whitman and I mentioned I was raised near Camden, where Whitman was buried, when he leaned forward and looked at me intently. "Are you a girl?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Is that a problem?"

He just laughed. "I'm sorry. I took you for a very pretty boy."

Beat poetry and punk—not to mention androgyny and homosexuality—are a far cry from those men and women looking for a safe, clean place to eat back in the early part of the last century. Then again, changing the rules of society is tough work in any era, and everyone, visionary or not, needs a good, solid meal to feed their dreams.

Melanie Rehak is the author of Eating for Beginners *(Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).*

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