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Victuals: A Reverie

Considering the enormous copiousness and variety of Maryland's victual supply and the high esteem in which, since early colonial days, the art of cooking has been held by the people, it seems strange, indeed, that the repertoire of essentially Maryland dishes remains so small and, in the main, so unattractive to the intellectual eater:

This, of course, is treason, but in treason there is often truth, and in the present case one need not search far to find that truth. There are in point of fact, but half a dozen civilized dishes to which Maryland can lay any sort of valid claim, and not more than three of them are dishes of the first consideration. We have been cooking and eating hereabout for nearly 300 years, but we have yet to invent our first soup, our first salad, our first pastry, our first sauce. The most delightful confections upon our bill of fare are not native inventions, but importations or adaptations. Even in the cooking of crabs we have borrowed our most striking ideas, and though it may be maintained, with some justice, that we have developed them and improved them, yet it must be admitted that we may lay no honest claim to their authorship.

This last proposition of course, will be vigorously (and perhaps peevishly and violently), combated by those authorities who hold the devilled crab to be Maryland invention. Let them how! Their indignation will be futile and beside the point, for the very simple reason that the devilled crab is by no means the most exquisite of crab dishes. It is, in truth, a victual of a decidedly crude and amateurish character and in the grand hierarchy of delicatessen its rank is down among the sandwiches, the fruit pies, the "potted" meats and other such lowly ornaments of the shoe-box and the quick-lunch room.

A man orders devilled crabs when he is in too great a hurry to eat in a civilized manner. When he has leisure and finds the proper mood upon him, when his palate is attuned to delicate thrills and his mind turns to poetical thoughts—at such times he calls for crab meat a la creole, that heavenly mess.

Who invented crab meat a la creole? I'm sure I don't know. But that its birthplace was Louisiana is indicated, not only by its name, but also by its composition. It is, as the French say, a "made" dish—that is, a delicacy which depends for its charm not so much upon the individual flavors of its ingredients as upon their felicitous blending. Crab flakes, mushrooms, green peppers, Bermuda onions, scalded and skinned tomatoes, sugar corn and bits of crab fat—these are the principal voices in the symphony. Over them the artistic cook pours melted butter, and the whole mixture is brought to a temperature of 205 degrees. It is then turned out over squares of brown toast upon a red-hot plate and is ready for the connoisseur. Eat it—and you will die with a smile! It is to all ordinary victuals as the Mona Lisa is to a colored supplement, or the nine superb masterpieces of Ludwig van Beethoven to the giges and fandangos of a hand-organ.

That combination of onions and mushrooms, green peppers and tomatoes is the hallmark, of course, of Creole cookery. The idea of combining them thus must stand forever as Louisiana's greatest contribution to human thought. The further idea of applying them, thus combined, to crab flakes was an inspiration, pure and simple—a stroke of genius entirely

independent of any conscious process of ratiocination. The inventor, in a word, did not think out the plan, as one thinks out a way to make a collar last five days instead of four, but arrived upon it suddenly and, to his own vast astonishment. No doubt, the sheer sublimity of it overcame him, as the melody of Walther's "Prize Song" overcame Richard Wagner. Perhaps he even fell senseless among his pots and pans and lay there, groaning with subconscious joy, for hours.

The point I am trying to make here is this: That crab meat a la creole, the greatest of all crab dishes, was not invented in Maryland, where the best crabs in the world are to be had, but in Louisiana, where the crab of commerce is a disgusting and unpalatable reptile, with coarse, greenish flesh and a repulsive exterior. What is the matter with Maryland's cooks? Why are they so lacking in imagination? Why have they so little inventiveness, such scant artistic fervor?

For 300 years they have been exercising their art upon the crab, and yet they haven't invented a single crab dish worth crossing the road to admire. In 300 years they have devised but one method of cooking the soft crab—and that an absurdly elemental one. In 300 years they have made no improvement in the devilled crab beyond the childish one of attaching an advertising label to its shell. For all that time, in a word, they have been accepting the homage of the world under false pretenses.

And not only in the cooking of crabs have they revealed a hunkerous lack of originality. The terrapin, too, has suffered at their hands. They have devised, to date, but two methods of cooking that exquisite fish—both so simple that a child might have invented them. Compare that slothful conservatism to the eager and assiduous experimenting of the French and German cooks, who, in less than 100 years, have devised 65 methods of cooking snails and no less than 225 varieties of wiener schnitzel. Every self respecting cook in Germany tries to invent his own schnitzel, and every French cook has his own snail recipe, as personal to himself as the cut of his beard or the quartering of his arms—and yet the cooks of Maryland have been content for years, and are content today, to slouch along in the old, old way, cooking terrapin as it was cooked by Eve in the garden.

Chicken a la Maryland for all its merits is an evidence not of originality and skill in the cooks of Maryland, but of that same backwardness we have been discussing. Instead of trying to improve it, to refine it, to provide it with rivals and satellites, they keep on cooking it as their grandmothers cooked it. Chicken a la Maryland by no means exhausts the possibilities of the domestic fowl. It is exquisite, but it tends to grow monotonous, and so the cultured eaters of Maryland are forced to turn for relief to various exotic chicken dishes. Why can't the cooks of Maryland come to their aid, fill that yawning abyss, seize that incomparable opportunity?

The greatest of all chicken dishes, of course, is not chicken a la Maryland at all but chicken pot-pie, an English invention. It is susceptible to all sorts of changes and embellishments. Like the mazurkas of Chopin, it leaves room for the self-expression of the artist. No two chicken pot-pies are exactly alike: no two that I have ever seen have contained exactly the same number of necks, livers and other by-products of the fowl. No two are identical chemically, biologically, geologically, paleantologically or psychotherapeutically. No two arouse exactly the same emotions, strike the same harmonies upon the sensitive strings of the palate, benumb the senses with the same perfumed vapors.