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DELMONICO'S: THE CREATION OF THE MODERN AMERICAN RESTAURANT

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the creation of the modern American restaurant and the factors that formed it through the lens of Delmonico's. Delmonico's is widely considered the first restaurant in America. During its lifetime, Delmonico's earned international acclaim for its classical French cuisine and excellent service. This thesis traces Delmonico's almost century-long history, from its beginnings in 1827 through 1848, its golden era until 1896, and its downfall in the 1920s. By combining both business and social history, this thesis argues for Delmonico's rightful place in the historical record and explains why the restaurant model developed by Delmonico's was successful. To achieve this result, many primary sources, including memoirs, cookbooks written by former Delmonico's chefs, and a plethora of newspaper articles are analyzed. This thesis will fill the gap in the scholarly record, both of a critical view of Delmonico's and the reasons for the restaurant format's prominence from the mid-nineteenth century forward in America.

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## Introduction

This thesis tells the story of Delmonico's. Restaurants, like Delmonico's, are important to understanding any culture. Food and eating are universal, and dining out is almost as pervasive, especially in the modern American experience. Inherently, restaurants are a celebration of abundance. However, the traditions embedded in dining out reflect much more than merely this generalization. Close study of restaurants can serve as a looking glass into the mores and values that underpin a culture. For example, Americans are fascinated today with restaurants that fuse cuisines while highlighting the essence of natural ingredients. This suggests a tolerant culture that finds natural food important. Studying restaurants throughout time affords similar results, and the story of Delmonico's will prove to be no exception. While this thesis contemplates the culture that created Delmonico's, it also considers broader societal factors and the forces of entrepreneurship.

From the entrepreneurship perspective, the restaurant may be even more important to study. According to statistics compiled in 2014 by the National Restaurant Association, the United States saw \$683.4 billion in sales shared among almost one million restaurants. The industry employs about 10 percent of the United States workforce or about fourteen million employees. Even more strikingly is the fact that the restaurant industry's share of the American food dollar is 47 percent.<sup>1</sup> In essence, for every dollar spent on food in the United States, forty-seven cents is in a restaurant. The adage that we are what we eat no longer describes America accurately. It is not only what we eat, but also *how* we eat. The restaurant signifies the package in

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<sup>1</sup> National Restaurant Association, "2014 Facts at a Glance," National Restaurant Association, <http://www.restaurant.org/News-Research/Research/Facts-at-a-Glance> (accessed April 2, 2014).

which America likes its food 47 percent of the time. It is important to study from a business perspective not only because of its share of the American economy, but also to understand how business sells food.

Unfortunately, the current scholarship has not yet fully examined the creation of the modern American restaurant. As will become increasingly apparent throughout this thesis, the story of Delmonico's and the way we dine today are inextricably linked. Although this thesis focuses solely on Delmonico's and New York City between 1827 and 1923, it also tells a much larger story. Delmonico's is the story of the creation of the modern American restaurant and is important to understanding why we eat the way we do today. As each chapter unfolds, the business and societal forces, which created, maintained, and destroyed Delmonico's, will be explained. Each of these forces is not only important to rise and decline of Delmonico's, but also to the rise and modification of the restaurant in America.

Delmonico's was a series of restaurants in New York City that began with a small café in 1827. Over many years, the namesake family of Swiss immigrants who owned these restaurants turned the American rags to riches myth into a reality. In its heyday, it catered to the high society of America and educated them on a new form of fine dining typified by French classical cuisine, the Russian style of service, and the *à la carte* menu. Delmonico's was widely considered the best restaurant in America and one of the best in the world. The Astors, Vanderbilts, Stuyvesants, and many others basked in its opulent surroundings and held fabulous balls that cost small fortunes. Presidents, foreign dignitaries, royalty, and celebrities oftentimes found themselves elbow-to-elbow with these wealthy patrons at Delmonico's well-appointed table. Over almost a full century of continuous service, eleven different locations, and three generations, Delmonico's storied career ended in 1923. In short, Delmonico's was a phenomenon.

Newspaper articles and advertisements throughout Delmonico's existence attest to the affect that Delmonico's had on American society and culture and the vision it created for the

fledging American dining industry. In the 1860s, when George Pullman introduced his first dining car, he named it the “The ‘Delmonico.’”<sup>2</sup> During the Spanish-American War, one supply boat laden with food for the troops was aptly named the Delmonico.<sup>3</sup> In the *Labor World* of Duluth, Minnesota, hundreds of miles away from New York City, an advertisement appears for the totally unrelated Delmonico Café owned by H. B. Gouth and Company.<sup>4</sup> In an 1879 article for the *Rocky Mountain Husbandman* (which quotes Mrs. Frank Leslie), it appears the Delmonico name even entered the vernacular. Mrs. Frank Leslie described her trip on the Chicago and Northwestern railway, saying that the “repast is Delmonican in its nature and style.”<sup>5</sup> An article from *The Sun* in 1903, describing a meal held by members of the Chinese Empire Reform Club, names the restaurant as “the Delmonico’s of Chinatown.”<sup>6</sup> Obviously, Delmonico’s was a part of American culture.

Besides these nods to Delmonico’s, newspaper after newspaper carried articles about the latest society event, organization meeting, or newest development at Delmonico’s. In 1921, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* published the remarkable story of James W. Hebron, a doorkeeper at Delmonico’s. In the article, they relate the story of Mr. Hebron:

four years after immigrating from Ireland in the seventies, he got a job at Delmonico’s at \$1 a day. His tips the first day were \$18, including a \$5 bill from William Waldorf Astor. Advice from patrons of the restaurant started him operating in the stock market, in which he was credited with having made \$1,000,000.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “The Delmonico: Excursion on Board Mr. Pullman’s New Dining Car,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 30, 1860, 4.

<sup>3</sup> “Plans: War Will Be Carried Into Spain,” *Salem (OR) Daily Capital Journal*, July 8, 1898, 1.

<sup>4</sup> “Delmonico Café,” advertisement, *Duluth (MN) Labor World*, October 31, 1908, 3.

<sup>5</sup> “The Public and Pullman Hotel Cars: Practice Better than Preaching – the Experience of those Who Have Used Them – The Verdict all one way – They are Liked by Everybody,” *Diamond City (MT) Rocky Mountain Husbandman*, January 9, 1879, 8.

<sup>6</sup> “Chinamen Get Gold Medals: For Their Work in Helping the Kishineff Fund,” *New York Sun*, November 21, 1903, 12.

<sup>7</sup> “Old Delmonico Doorkeeper Dies, Leaving a Fortune,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 30, 1921, 1.

In 1900, the *Red Cloud Chief* of Nebraska announced that the executive chef of over 30 years at Delmonico's was "The King of Cooks."<sup>8</sup> If the *Food Network* had existed during the nineteenth century, Charles Ranhofer certainly would have been one of its stars. In 1881, the *Dallas Daily Herald*, proclaimed that the "four establishments in New York surpass in resources and in patronage any restaurant in the world."<sup>9</sup> Obviously, Delmonico's was a large part of not only New York culture, but also of American culture, being cited as far away as Minnesota, Nebraska, and Texas. All of these accounts, although different in their origin and purpose, attest to the same thing: Delmonico's was an extraordinary American business.

The first chapter, which spans the years between 1827 and 1848, aims to both place the reader in early nineteenth century dining and explain the rise of Delmonico's. The first chapter examines such entrepreneurial factors as the Erie Canal and the growth of New York City, the introduction of the à la carte menu, and front of house innovations introduced by Delmonico's. The first chapter also illustrates the social obstacles that Delmonico's, and the restaurant concept, had to hurdle in order to be accepted. One obstacle was the Dutch and English population of New York City that had to be convinced to eat French food. On the other hand, Knickerbocker children initially accepted the food as a rebellion against their cultural roots. Encouraging press coverage and celebrity appearances served to augment Delmonico's reputation. At the end of the chapter, the reader will have a solid idea of how the entrepreneurial and societal reasons for the rise of Delmonico's, and the restaurant concept, during the early nineteenth century.

The second chapter picks up the Delmonico's story in 1848 and brings it to 1896, a period that is widely considered Delmonico's golden age. This chapter focuses its entrepreneurship section on Delmonico's segmentation strategy, Lorenzo Delmonico's leadership, and the restaurant's famed reliability. It also touches on societal factors that supported

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<sup>8</sup> "The King of Cooks: How he Made over \$100,000 in the Kitchen," *Red Cloud Chief (NE) Chief*, November 2, 1900.

<sup>9</sup> "The Delmonicos: New York Mall," *Dallas Daily Herald*, September 11, 1881, 7.



the Delmonico's restaurants. This includes its reputation as a meeting place for fraternal organizations, its innovation of turning the host and guest system into the server and customer system, and the battle between the old and new wealth of the leisure class. This chapter will give the reader an understanding of how the restaurant concept was adapted to the fashion of the times.

The third chapter examines a meal at Delmonico's. The chapter opens with an explanation of the French and Russian style of service and explains why the Russian style won in America by the 1870s. It continues by walking through Sir Morton Peto's famous dinner given in 1865, right after the hostilities of the Civil War had ended. This chapter will give the reader a chance to see Delmonico's from a diner's eye view at the height of its popularity and power.

The final chapter follows Delmonico's from 1896 until its demise in 1923. Instead of tracing the reasons for Delmonico's success, it traces the reasons for its failure and the changes in restaurant culture. From the entrepreneurship side, the fourth chapter illustrates how Delmonico's lost the talent and the wild game that made it exceptional. It also shows that a changing restaurant landscape and the strain of Prohibition left it ill-equipped to meet the challenges of a new century. From the perspective of society, the twentieth century brought with it loosened morals, which clashed with Delmonico's conservative reputation. The very reputation for propriety that had been an asset to Delmonico's had also lost its luster after a lengthy legal battle within the family. Finally, the United States efforts in World War I made having a large, expensive meal at Delmonico's unfashionable. The fashion and culture of the American restaurant had left Delmonico's behind.

By the end of these four chapters, it will become abundantly clear just how important Delmonico's is to how we eat today. Dining out in the 1800s is not so different from the way we eat today, which is largely due to the entrepreneurship of two Swiss brothers. It will also become clear that the creation of the restaurant was not a passive process. External factors, like the growth of New York City, were certainly important, but internal factors were just as important. It was

what the Delmonico family actively created that made the restaurant a viable business option and it was their successors, who copied this model, that now serve us today.

## Chapter 1

### The Rise of Delmonico's – 1827 - 1848

#### Introduction

What originally began in 1824 as a New York City wine shop importing French and Spanish wines blossomed into a small café at 23 William Street by 1827. The café, owned by brothers John and Peter Delmonico, was located right in the heart of the present-day financial district, just a brief stroll away from Battery Park or the New York Stock Exchange. John, the youngest of the Delmonico brothers born in Mairengo, Switzerland, had spent much of his life at sea. After countless trips between Cuba, America, and Europe commanding the three-masted schooner, *Fidelity*, he decided to settle in New York City. After he saw the potential in the fast-growing city, he closed his small wine shop and returned to Switzerland to bring his brother, Peter Delmonico, to the land of opportunity. His brother was already successful in his own right, selling baked goods in a confectionary shop that he owned in the city of Berne.<sup>1</sup> Together, they returned to America and opened that small café. Under their leadership, the small café grew into a series of restaurants that changed the fabric of New York City society and redefined dining in America.

In 1837, The *New-York Spectator* devoted a portion of its front page to the newly constructed Delmonico's restaurant at the corner of William and Beaver Streets, "immediately in the rear of the new Exchange."<sup>2</sup> Although the paper had been invited to send a representative to

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<sup>1</sup> Lately Thomas [Robert Steele], *Delmonico's: A Century of Splendor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 6-8.

<sup>2</sup> "Delmonico's," *New-York Spectator*, September 25, 1837, 1.

the inaugural dinner at what became known as “The Citadel,” they forgot to attend. They were able to note the account of another newspaper, explaining that there was “feasting, with music, mirth and wine,” and that the location “exceeds the best in or about the Palais Royal in Paris.”<sup>3</sup> Today, the triangular structure opened in 1837 still stands at the same corner, continues to maintain the imported Pompeian marble portico, and still proudly displays the name, Delmonico’s, over the doorway.

This chapter is devoted to explaining the rise of Delmonico’s, from small café to the premier restaurant of America in the space of about 20 years, through both entrepreneurial and societal factors. It begins by examining the construction of the Erie Canal in 1825 and how it made New York City the financial center of the United States. Because the Canal brought wealth and many visitors to the city, a customer base for Delmonico’s naturally developed. Next, it will turn to Delmonico’s introduction of the restaurant concept and the à la carte menu to America, and why this model for a dining establishment was both revolutionary and successful. Finally, it will turn to the front of house, and examine the beginnings of Delmonico’s outstanding service and atmosphere.

This chapter will also focus attention on societal factors that contributed to Delmonico’s success. First, it will explain how Delmonico’s was able to convert solidly English and Dutch New York City to French cuisine. Second, it will discuss how Delmonico’s leveraged newspaper reports and famous guests to build their reputation among the elite. Third, the chapter ends with an examination of how rebelling youth found refuge in Delmonico’s and became the most loyal customers over the next half century.

## **Entrepreneurship**

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<sup>3</sup> “Delmonico’s,” *New-York Spectator*, September 25, 1837, 1.

### *The City Grows with the Erie Canal*

Although the construction of the Erie Canal may not seem important to the story of Delmonico's success, it was essential in creating its large customer base. Originally, the Erie Canal was constructed for military, not commercial, purposes. During the War of 1812, the state of New York had found it extremely difficult to transport troops and supplies overland to the frontlines. In 1817, a grand canal was proposed to alleviate this pressure, and after eight years of construction by hand, was completed in October of 1825. The Canal "extended 363 miles from Albany, on the upper Hudson River, to Buffalo, on Lake Erie," in effect connecting New York City to the Midwest.<sup>4</sup> It quickly became one of the most important waterways in all of America, and outgrew its military roots to embrace its commercial potential. The Erie Canal was the major factor responsible for New York City's rise to power as the financial center of America. With the Canal's construction came wealth, trade, and customers for Delmonico's. This section will explore the expansion of Delmonico's customer base, starting with New York City before the construction of the Canal. It will then go on to explain how boardinghouse culture, foreign businessmen, the physical layout of the city, and the introduction of the business lunch all made Delmonico's viable.

Examining New York City before and after the Erie Canal illustrates the size of its impact. At the turn of the eighteenth century, New York City was still "poised between the Dutch village it had so recently been and the teeming commercial city it was soon to become."<sup>5</sup> During the Revolutionary War, the city consisted of just 4,000 wooden structures at the tip of wooded

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew F. Smith, *Eating History: 30 Turning Points in the Making of American Cuisine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 13-17.

<sup>5</sup> William Grimes, *Appetite City: A Culinary History of New York* (New York: North Point Press, 2009), 3.

Manhattan.<sup>6</sup> But the trade brought by the Erie Canal grew the village of Manhattan into a cosmopolitan city that rivaled those in the Old World. As food historian Andrew Smith explains, “within fifteen years of the canal’s opening, more tonnage was moving through the Port of New York than the combined tonnage of the nation’s three other largest ports.”<sup>7</sup> Originally, the main export through the Canal was wheat from other parts of the state, which was milled in the city and shipped out to the “southern United States, the Caribbean, and Europe.”<sup>8</sup> These ships would return loaded with goods, most notably an “extraordinary variety of tropical fruits...and the giant green turtle”<sup>9</sup> from the Caribbean and the South bound for New York City or the American interior. While problems with potable water and disease persisted, the city quickly expanded from its 4,000 dwellings to accommodate the new business demands. With the plethora of goods passing through New York, businessmen either settled in or visited New York City to find their fortune. As William Grimes, former *New York Times* restaurant critic and culinary historian, notes, “in 1835 alone, with a population of 270,000, the city played host to about 60,000 visitors, each of whom stayed for an average of three days.”<sup>10</sup> In stark contrast, the population in 1820 was only 123,000.<sup>11</sup> In the space of just 15 years, the population had more than doubled, and the amount of visitors to the city was almost half of the population in 1820. The trade facilitated by the Erie Canal was the major factor in this spike in population, and paved the way for Delmonico’s.

The exponential growth of the city led to a time of unparalleled opportunity for the fledging restaurant industry. New residents in the city did not buy a house or rent an apartment

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Batterberry and Ariane Batterberry, *On the Town in New York: The Landmark History of Eating, Drinking, and Entertainments from the American Revolution to the Food Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Eating History*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Batterberry and Batterberry, *On the Town*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Grimes, *Appetite City*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Batterberry and Batterberry, *On the Town*, 3.

like most do today. This was not because they did not wish to, but because “Gotham’s housing stock famously failed to keep pace with the city’s growth,” so many were forced to stay in hotels or boardinghouses.<sup>12</sup> The need for housing was so dire that “between 1830 and 1860, permanent residents occupied half of the hotel rooms in New York.”<sup>13</sup> Because most buildings of the time were constructed of wood, it would have been both impractical and dangerous for each boarder in a commercial boardinghouse to have his own kitchen. Boarders would thus pay for both their room and board. Although somewhat strange to the modern observer, the hotels of the time also followed the model of the boardinghouse, and furnished customers with meals at set times.<sup>14</sup> Most commonly, these establishments served two meals a day, breakfast and dinner. These meals were often unsatisfactory, and sometimes barely edible. An 1849 account by British journalist Thomas Butler Gunn shares his experience with boarding house culture of the time. In his chapter on “mean boardinghouses,” he explains that “the vegetables are worthy of notice. Potatoes tasting like something between yellow soap and bad artichokes, carrots out which all flavor has been boiled, and large, rank, greasy cabbages.”<sup>15</sup> With many being subjected to similarly unsatisfactory meals, there was a large unmet need in the city for quality food. While this was bad for boardinghouse business, it presented quite an opportunity for Delmonico’s.

Delmonico’s clean dining room, substantial food, and high quality were a welcome respite from boardinghouse food during the lunch and dinnertime rush. Of course, the people who would stay in cheap boardinghouses probably did not eat at the more expensive Delmonico’s, but businessmen who could afford the added cost chose Delmonico’s. Thus, “little by little it became known that delicious coffee, and cakes that melted in the mouth, could be procured at the

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<sup>12</sup> Cindy R. Lobel, “‘Out to Eat’ The Emergence and Evolution of the Restaurant in Nineteenth Century New York City,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 44, (Summer/Autumn 2010): 196.

<sup>13</sup> Lobel, “‘Out to Eat,’” 196.

<sup>14</sup> A more in-depth discussion of this system, the American plan, follows in the next section of this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Butler Gunn, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1857), 94.

‘Frenchmen’s.’”<sup>16</sup> John and Peter leveraged this trust in their original café business into trust for their new restaurant, an expansion off of the café made in 1831. They slowly captured business from the throng of boarders and businessmen who comprised the majority of the city’s restaurant-going population. Once they felt comfortable with the amount and quality of their clientele, they again moved into larger surroundings in 1837 at “The Citadel,” located behind the newly constructed stock exchange.

Their restaurant and café on 23 and 25 William Street met boarders’ needs, but they also “opened a modest hotel to serve mostly foreign businessmen” in 1834.<sup>17</sup> The hotel was a former lodging house on 76 Broad Street, run by Joseph Collet.<sup>18</sup> This time, John and Peter were able to leverage the business of a hotel to promote their dining room to visiting or transplanted foreigners. Many were desperately looking for a restaurant to provide the comforts of home in a strange land. The cuisine the brothers served satisfied the comfort needs of the many French, Swiss, and Italians who had settled in New York City. The foreign element, although a small part of the total population, was a large and important part of Delmonico’s original clientele. Foreigners flocked to New York City for the opportunity created by the Canal. The 76 Broad Street location gained even more importance after the Great Fire of 1835, because it was the only surviving Delmonico owned structure. After the fire, it was temporarily converted into a restaurant until “The Citadel” had finished construction.

The expansion of the city also created a new demand for dining out for lunch because of the city’s new arrangement. As the city grew, the downtown area became flooded with businesses, residences, shops, and boardinghouses. Residents of all economic classes were forced into living in close quarters with each other. However, “as the pace of trade accelerated and the size and scale of business grew, the face of the city changed accordingly. Whereas in the

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



eighteenth century, city blocks had housed a somewhat chaotic mélange of trades, business, and residences, spatial organization along economic lines began to characterize the city in the early nineteenth century.”<sup>19</sup> As expected, those with means found a way to live farther and farther uptown, away from the noise, congestion, and unsavory smells that plagued the business district. Abram C. Dayton remembers the young city of the early nineteenth century in his reminiscences posthumously published in 1882. He said of eating houses of the time that “dinner was the meal upon which they depended, and the noon hour their harvest times.”<sup>20</sup> While many laborers went to a place like Clark and Brown’s that sold a fast lunch at an appealing price, “the new [Delmonico’s] restaurant caught on and businessmen began to think little of taking an hour from their preoccupations to relish an appetizing luncheon immaculately presented.”<sup>21</sup> Even with the relatively small portion of the lunch trade that could afford the expense, Delmonico’s could still prosper.

Finally, Delmonico’s introduced the concept of a business lunch to America. While it was probably inadvertent, Delmonico’s catered specifically to the businessmen who wished to have a meeting over lunch. Virtually nowhere else could you find a restaurant quite like Delmonico’s, where “a delicate dish of veal...might even be an aid when broaching a subject equally delicate to a business associate.”<sup>22</sup> Delmonico’s also had a quiet atmosphere with individual tables. Besides the worries about food in a hotel dining room, it was understandably quite difficult to discuss private business matters at a communal table filled with boisterous, hungry eaters. Because only Delmonico’s offered the amenities essential to business meetings, it “provided space and opportunity for ambitious New Yorkers to see and be seen, to transact deals

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<sup>19</sup> Lobel, ““Out to Eat,”” 195.

<sup>20</sup> Abram C. Dayton, *Last Days of Knickerbocker Life in New York* (New York: G.W. Harlan, 1882), 96-97.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

and forge commercial and political connections.”<sup>23</sup> Without the growth of the city precipitated by the Erie Canal, the lunchtime trade would not have had space for a restaurant like Delmonico’s.

The proof of Delmonico’s ability to capture more and more of the restaurant trade is evidenced most concretely by its growth. By the time that Lorenzo Delmonico, the nephew of John and Peter, had taken full control in 1848, the family had held locations at 25 William Street, 76 Broad Street, and behind the newly constructed stock exchange. These all required significant cash outlays acquired through credit, especially the construction of the building that housed “The Citadel.” While part of it came from their own savings, some also came from outside loans. Not only did the brothers believe that their business was growing, but also the prudent creditors who helped to finance their new ventures. In addition, John and Peter sent multiple letters home requesting Francesco, the oldest brother who inherited the family farm, to send family to America to help in the business. This can only lead to the conclusion that the Delmonico family was prospering in America.

The Erie Canal was essential to the growth of New York City, and thus to the growth of the Delmonico restaurant concept. The Canal brought with it trade, wealth, and people from all over the world. The combination of these three elements made the perfect environment for Delmonico’s and created a sizeable population of potential clients. Delmonico’s took advantage of the opportunities that arose from the failings of boardinghouses and the physical expansion of the city. However, these external factors are only part of the story of Delmonico’s initial success. Their success was also dependent on the way they chose to run their business.

### ***A New Type of Menu: Delmonico’s Introduces Dining À La Carte to America***

At the time of Delmonico’s first restaurant foray, hungry eaters were either forced to eat at a specified time in a hotel, with little ability to choose their meal, or to find a street vendor or

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<sup>23</sup> Lobel, ““Out to Eat,”” 203.

café selling something substantial. According to Abram Dayton “eating-houses...were limited in number, commonplace in appointments, and would not ordinarily be deemed of sufficient importance to warrant even a passing notice.”<sup>24</sup> From a twenty-first century perspective of almost unlimited choice and convenience, Old New York stands out as a food desert, devoid of options. However, very few in the early nineteenth century could imagine any wholesale change. Two of those few were the Delmonico brothers, Peter and John. Delmonico’s was among the few freestanding eating establishments in the city, along with the likes of the Bank Coffee House and Clark and Brown’s. However, they stood out from the others because of the à la carte menu they introduced at their first restaurant, which literally revolutionized the dining industry. The à la carte menu was one of the key innovations of modern American restaurant culture. To get a true sense of how significant this change was, this section first examines the American plan, which was dominant at hotels and boardinghouses across the country. After that, it examines the *à la carte* menu concept. Finally, this section considers the à la carte menu’s practical application at Delmonico’s.

The American plan was how most American dining out was done before the advent of Delmonico’s. To be clear, the American plan was only in reference to the hotel and boardinghouse industry. The American plan was when meals were supplied by the hotel or boardinghouse, and were part of the price paid for lodging. The American plan had a counterpart across the Atlantic in the European plan, which allowed boarders to choose whether they wanted to pay for both food and lodging. In other words, the European plan gave patrons the ability to choose where and when they took their meals. More precisely, the American plan meant that meals were served family style within a small, set time window. Patrons would sit at a large, communal table with fellow boarders and maybe a few outsiders. The only choice boarders had in what food they ate was what they could snatch before it was gone. At the City Hotel, the premier

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<sup>24</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 96.

hotel of the city, the noonday meal consisted of “twelve to sixteen meat dishes...which might include venison, bear steak, wild turkey and duck, lobster, terrapin, crabs, oysters and pigeon, as well as local vegetables, fruit, and fish,” and served “fifty to a hundred seated at one of its long communal tables.”<sup>25</sup> As related in the novel *The Perils of Pearl Street*, a boardinghouse on the opposite end of the spectrum had much less choice and was rather unappetizing. The author describes boardinghouse coffee:

The basis of it...was water, drawn from the Manhattan hydrant or the pump, which in its purest state was scarcely drinkable. Added to this was a small quantity of damaged coffee, burnt crust, or roasted rye, well pulverized...the taste of this strange mixture being indescribable, I leave to the reader’s imagination.<sup>26</sup>

The American plan seems so foreign to the modern American diner because it allows no room for the choice, convenience, and privacy that typify restaurants today.

Whatever the shortcomings of the American plan, it was in no way the wrong business model for America at the time. During the early nineteenth century, travel was just about the only time that a person would eat outside of the home, and even travel was rather limited. As mentioned previously, the other reason was because people it was impractical in the growing city to travel back home for lunch. The modern reasons for dining out, like entertaining business associates, not wanting to do dishes, or wishing to indulge, had not yet developed. Even if some patrons demanded better or more varied options, it was very risky for entrepreneurs to develop a new system. Because of food’s unique nature as a highly perishable item and the relatively low demands of the time, the risks were high while the returns were low. As a result, even in major cities like New York, there were very few freestanding dining options.

On the other hand, the American plan made good business sense for a hotel or boardinghouse. Although their main source of revenue stemmed from providing rooms, they

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<sup>25</sup> Batterberry and Batterberry, *On the Town*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Asa Greene, *The Perils of Pearl Street*, (New York: Betts & Anstice, and Peter Hill, 1834), 38-39.

could charge a little more because they also included food and drink. They were able to curtail the risks of selling food because they knew each day when they went to market how many patrons were going to be at dinner. However, the food was seen as an additional, albeit essential, service provided. It was not likely that patrons would pick another hotel solely on the basis of the food offerings, especially because of the small amount of information available to a traveler on the quality of different hotels. Other options, like street peddlers and cafés put little pressure on the American plan, because they were lacking in some essential way. Street peddlers offered very limited foodstuffs without anywhere to sit and eat. Cafés were mostly in the business of offering specialty non-alcoholic drinks, like coffee or hot chocolate, and pastries. To most hungry residents of the city, this was not enough to make a meal.

The Delmonico brothers distanced themselves from any other dining establishment in the city with their introduction of the *à la carte* menu. The *à la carte* menu was developed in Parisian restaurants and was a radical departure from both the American style of dining. The *à la carte* menu coupled with the restaurant concept completely changed the American dining tradition. While the idea of the restaurant and the *à la carte* menu might seem rather pedestrian to a modern observer, they were quite extraordinary to diners at the time. The restaurant concept allowed the customer to eat as an individual, at his own table, instead of in a group at a communal table. Thus, there was no squabbling over whom got the best piece of meat and none of the unpleasantness associated with eating with strangers. This concept created a public-private dining space. In other words, even though diners were in public, they were at their own table and were afforded a private experience. The *à la carte* menu instituted other important changes. It almost completely abolished set times for meals (besides the restaurant's operating hours) and allowed diners to choose the content of their meal. The earliest surviving Delmonico's menu, from 1838,

listed 364 separate dishes.<sup>27</sup> Almost any time of the day or night, a diner could go to Delmonico's and choose whatever dishes they would like to eat in whatever order. Because of their commitment to service, and the relatively small nature of their early operation, the brothers would even cook dishes not on the menu. With the à la carte menu and restaurant innovations, Delmonico's introduced choice, convenience, and privacy to the American diner. These principles still undergird the modern dining experience.

Practically, an à la carte menu of 364 items put up obstacles to profit that the Delmonico brothers strove to solve. However, because of the menu's construction, the brother's did not have to actually be ready to prepare 364 separate items. One of the first things to recognize is that this menu was somewhat seasonal. For example, fresh sweet peas were difficult to find in New York during the winter. Taking out the seasonal items lowers the menu's offerings considerably. Besides seasonality, many dishes would substitute a protein. An easy example to understand would be a preparation of Chicken or Veal Parmesan. The only difference between the two dishes from the restaurateur's perspective was the need to stock chicken in addition to veal. All the other ingredients stay the same, thus cutting down on both the amount of preparation needed as well as the amount money that had to be sunk into buying expensive ingredients. The core number of dishes on the menu is then decreased even more.

A more important weapon to combat this hurdle was setting the right price. The Delmonico brothers understood their market very well and knew that their customers would only bear a certain level of prices before they were unable to patronize Delmonico's. Therefore, they signaled their quality with high prices, but kept reasonable to attract as many customers as possible. Their original competition in the café business, fellow Frenchman François Guerin, sold "bonbons...[at] fifty cents a pound, an outrageous extravagance in New York of that time" while Delmonico's sold "coffee [for] six cents, a cup of creamy chocolate or a *petit verre* of cognac

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, reproduced in full on opening pages.

[for] the same...cakes at a penny, and a prime Havana cigar was available at six cents, perfectos retailing at two for a shilling.”<sup>28</sup> As Abram Dayton explains, Delmonico’s was known for only “moderate charges...[that] suited the pockets of some of the Knickerbocker youths.”<sup>29</sup> These reasonable prices continued at Delmonico’s restaurant forays at 25 William, 76 Broad, and at “The Citadel.” Because the brothers only charged reasonable prices, they were able to lower the barriers for profitability that are inherent in the á la carte system.

With the introduction of the á la carte menu, a milestone was achieved in the fledging restaurant industry. While the Delmonico brothers did not create the concept, they were the first in America to make it practical and translate it into an American fine-dining experience. Before the introduction of the restaurant and á la carte menu concepts, New York City eating was devoid of choice, convenience, or privacy. These concepts continue to delight customers and influence proprietors to this day. For this reason alone, Delmonico’s should be considered an extremely influential restaurant in American fine-dining.

### ***Front of House Innovations at Delmonico’s***

Even though the concept of the á la carte menu was an important step in the dining industry, for Delmonico’s to succeed, it needed to create the full experience, from kitchen to front of house service. Delmonico’s standards, created under the watchful eyes of John and Peter, were instrumental to their success. Delmonico’s was known from the very start for its cleanliness and exceptional service, something that differentiated it from other dining establishments.

The first thing that distinguished Delmonico’s dining experience was their clean appearance. Their first restaurant was described as having “some half-dozen pine tables with requisite wooden chairs to match, and on a board counter covered with white napkins was ranged

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 11, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 114.

the limited assortment of pastry.”<sup>30</sup> Although this is rather sparse in comparison to “The Citadel” of 1837, which sported “a marble column in front tastefully ornamented...elegant curtains...[and] floors...inlaid with polished panels of maple, mahogany, and black walnut,” the décor still outshined the competition.<sup>31</sup> Clark and Brown’s, an English-style chophouse, was described as having “a no-frills dining room with a dingy bar up front and mahogany booths in the rear.”<sup>32</sup> François Guerin’s café, the biggest competition at the time for the brothers, was “a dingy place” and Dayton is of the opinion that “the proprietor had no ambition for display and very little love for even cleanliness; he spent nothing in repairs or renovation.”<sup>33</sup> Obviously, Delmonico’s clean, pleasant dining room offered a much better alternative to the boardinghouse table, Guerin’s café, or Clark and Brown’s chophouse. The Delmonico’s developed their restaurant as a bastion of propriety and respectability, which was important to the Dutch and English customers. Above that, it ensured that only the correct clientele, an oft-overlooked part of the front of house environment, would walk through the door. An obnoxious, ill-mannered patron was just as troublesome as a rude server. This commitment to pleasant surroundings both established Delmonico’s as a restaurant committed to quality and signaled to consuming public that quality food could be had too.

Something else differentiated Delmonico’s, which was quite uncommon for the time, a female working the front of house. Dayton remembers that in the café’s early days, “the sisters of the proprietor, middle-aged women, were the sole attendants.”<sup>34</sup> According to Lately Thomas, “the novelty of a woman restaurant employee excited curiosity among the Americans; it had never been seen in the city.”<sup>35</sup> In stark contrast to competitors, the female cashier signaled that

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<sup>30</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 114.

<sup>31</sup> “Delmonico’s,” *New-York Spectator*, September 25, 1837, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Grimes, *Appetite City*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 114.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 10.



Delmonico's was a place for *gentlemen*. Delmonico's was the spot for the refined man, one who appreciated the taste of his food and the thought behind it, a gourmet. Other restaurants hired men or boys to wait on tables. At Clark and Brown's, "a small boy would poke his head into the booth, taking orders and shouting them over to attendants near the kitchen."<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Peter and John Delmonico supervised and worked the small dining room. Dayton talks of the service, saying the meals were "duly served by the 'Chef' in person, who, with white paper cap and apron, was only too glad to officiate as his own 'garçon.'"<sup>37</sup> Delmonico's was especially known for "courteous manner of the host," even to the least of their customers.<sup>38</sup> This type of attentive service was new to the residents of New York City, and engendered respect and admiration for the proprietors. The commitment to service cemented Delmonico's status as the restaurant for the slice of New York's population with elevated tastes.

With the front of house service that Delmonico's offered, it completed the unique restaurant experience. Not only did they offer a menu available at any time and filled with choices, they did it with style and grace. A very clean, and later grand, environment fit with the food and created the quiet atmosphere for which "The Citadel" became famous. The kind, deferential service only added to the appointments. But all this would have been for nothing if society would not accept it.

## **Society**

### ***Conversion to French Cuisine***

One of the most perplexing puzzles, especially with the early portions of the Delmonico story, was how John and Peter convinced a New York City culture dominated by a Dutch and

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<sup>36</sup> Grimes, *Appetite City*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 114.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

English hegemony to accept French food culture. Just as today, the food people eat is inherently linked to their cultural heritage and to definition of self. This is normally developed during a child's formative years and strongly influences food choices throughout the rest of their life. To solve this puzzle, this section starts by explaining the cuisine of Anglo-American settlers. It goes on to explain the multiple ways in which Delmonico's was either not dependent on the English and Dutch or found ways to convince these cultures to accept French cuisine.

To illustrate the Anglo-American view on food, it would be instructive to go through a few examples. Throughout New York City, taverns, chop houses, and even street vendors peddled English favorites. Abram Dayton described the food served as "plain roasted and boiled."<sup>39</sup> The celebrated food historian Harvey Levenstein agrees, saying "like their counterparts in Britain, early New Englanders thought of vegetables as sauces to accompany meats, much in the way applesauce accompanies pork today," their "favored method for preparing meat was to roast large fatty joints. Big chunks of meat or whole fowls were also boiled," and "a relatively light hand with spices continued to characterize cooking in both countries during the nineteenth century."<sup>40</sup> Anglo-American food was characterized by an emphasis on bland, boiled or plain roasted meats with little to no vegetables. The other strong cultural element in New York City was the Dutch and like the English, they were "solidly conservative in their manners and their tastes."<sup>41</sup>

The Anglo-American and Dutch eating cultures were committed to simple food and were exceedingly resistant to culinary change, especially that proposed by French cuisine. According to Levenstein, "Americans manifested a remarkable degree of resistance to the culinary influence

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<sup>39</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 115.

<sup>40</sup> Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 4-5.

<sup>41</sup> Grimes, *Appetite City*, 3.

of other cultures.”<sup>42</sup> It even got to the point where “spicy foods [were] blamed for inducing a craving for alcohol” and were thought to stimulate “inordinate appetites for sex.”<sup>43</sup> In an environment this hostile, it is hard to imagine how the brothers were successful.

Some of Delmonico’s success was in not depending on them in the first place. By the 1820s there was “a constant flow of immigrants...as well as swarms of businessmen from other states.”<sup>44</sup> Dayton remembers that “the European Continental element was becoming sufficiently important...[even though] French and Italian citizens were few in number.”<sup>45</sup> Thomas seems to agree, explaining that “the first customers the little café attracted were European residents in the city,” of which “there was a considerable colony...mostly agents of export houses.”<sup>46</sup> The brothers knew, at the very least, that the substantial amount of foreigners in the city would support their restaurant, because they served them the comfort they remembered from back home.

The other way Delmonico’s circumvented this problem was in giving the French style restaurant an aura of respectability, as opposed to sinful extravagance. John and Peter could rely on American’s respect for the views of the Continent. Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont explain that many of the foods native to America were not accepted there “until after Europe had accepted them and reimported them to the land of their origin.”<sup>47</sup> In Europe, French food was the pinnacle of culinary achievement, so eating French food in America could be accepted on those terms. It was also not exactly new to New York City. The French fleeing from The Terror were welcomed and were able to introduce their many culinary innovations, like “soups, salads, sweet oil, tomatoes, ragouts, and fricassees.”<sup>48</sup> As evidenced by the founding documents of America,

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<sup>42</sup> Levenstein, *Revolution*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Batterberry and Batterberry, *On the Town*, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 109.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Waverley Root and Richard de Rochemont, *Eating in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 10.

<sup>48</sup> Batterberry and Batterberry, *On the Town*, 33.

French political thought had enormous influence on some of the most celebrated Americans, like Thomas Jefferson. Enlightenment thinkers viewed concepts like separation of powers or natural rights as principles of a scientific pursuit of the ideal government. In much the same way, French was “the language of cooks as Latin [was] the language of lawyers.”<sup>49</sup> Viewing what the Delmonico’s were doing as gastronomy instead of as cooking elevated eating there above the confines of cultural heritage and into the guise of education and personal refinement. The respect for the Continent, familiarity with French expatriates in New York City, and viewing French cuisine as a refined form of cooking were all avenues for acceptance.

More practically, Delmonico’s was a French restaurant that embraced the bounty of America and recognized some of the traditions of Anglo-Americans. Looking at the 1838 menu, it is apparent that Delmonico’s realized the importance of both its foreign and domestic clientele. Turtle soup appears, which had long been recognized in America as a classic. As historians Michael and Ariane Batterberry remark, “there seemed no limit to enthusiasm where turtles were concerned” in the early nineteenth century.<sup>50</sup> While many dishes, like salad, various meats in classic French sauces, omelets, and green vegetables were probably unappealing to domestic diners; they were enticing to many homesick Continental immigrants. On the other hand, plainly boiled or roasted meat with potatoes, pickles, relish, or jelly, and raw oysters were comforting to the more conservative diner. Through offering options to both groups they wished to attract, Delmonico’s was able to gain the trust of the old wealth, traditional families of New York City. They used this trust to gradually introduce diners to more foreign and flavorful dishes. Dayton describes the process he underwent, saying “It must not...be thought, that the new converts...plunged at once into the vortex of the elaborate and expensive spread...by no means

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 32-33.

<sup>50</sup> Batterberry and Batterberry, *On the Town*, 36.

was such the case.”<sup>51</sup> Instead, it was a gradual process that involved building up both trust and courage, and this process eventually paid off for both sides.

Delmonico’s was born in a city dominated by Dutch and English culture that valued plain food, simply prepared, and with a minimum of vegetables. French cuisine had the exact opposite philosophy, valuing the art of dining, flavorful sauces, and any edible vegetable that could be pulled from the earth. Delmonico’s relied initially on the substantial amount of foreigners in the city. Because of the long familiarity with the French in the city, the respectability of French cuisine, and culinary accommodation Delmonico’s was able to convince more and more people to step outside their culture and try a new cuisine. They also had the help of the newspapers in this process.

### ***Glowing Reviews and Famous Faces at Delmonico’s***

In the early 1800s, even more than in the present day, reviews of restaurants or shops in newspapers were very important, because they were one of the sources for daily information. Delmonico’s deft move in 1837 of inviting all of the major newspapermen of New York City to the grand opening of “The Citadel” virtually guaranteed good press. These glowing reviews served a dual purpose. The favorable reviews gave basic information to readers while making Delmonico’s an acceptable place to eat. In addition to this initial newspaper coverage, Delmonico’s also received a lot of attention because of the clientele it naturally attracted, the rich and famous of the city. Again, newspapers reported on the activities of the famous, and through this, Delmonico’s was able to gain notoriety, acceptance, and an air of exclusiveness.

In 1837, a journalist from New York’s *Evening Post* accepted an invitation from John and Peter Delmonico to attend the opening meal of “The Citadel.” With this clever move by the brothers, they were able to all but assure a great review. This was essential in a time when it was

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<sup>51</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 115.

deemed improper or unseemly to advocate too strongly for oneself. The article, typical of the many articles to come over Delmonico's history, glowingly reviews the new restaurant. The article starts by remarking that the writers "would tax our invention in vain to find words to describe the numerous conveniences made in this house," and goes on to remark that the writers along with others from the newspaper community "enjoyed the luxury of an abundant table...the elegance of the entertainment was in keeping with the whole."<sup>52</sup> In describing the appointments of the restaurant, the writer says "the first story contains a fine saloon, with a floor of marble, elegantly laid in diamond shape. The second story also has a saloon – the floor inlaid with the choicest samples of wood."<sup>53</sup> In a time when restaurant guides were few, and the information contained therein was scarce, a review like this gave very important information to many readers. Without pictures, it was necessary to provide a detailed, if somewhat flamboyant, explanation of the scene. More than the detailed description, the article signaled to the reader that Delmonico's was acceptable. With this article and others like it, Delmonico's was able to gain acceptance in the community and attract new customers.

Celebrities also helped to attract newspaper coverage and help Delmonico's gain acceptance. According to Lately Thomas, "Albert Gallatin...frequented the Delmonicos from the start, attracted both as a fellow Swiss and as a connoisseur of food."<sup>54</sup> Albert Gallatin, by that time, had already served as Thomas Jefferson's Secretary of Treasury, and was an important figure in American politics. Gallatin serves as just one example of the many celebrities that were to visit Delmonico's over the next eighty years. Thomas goes on to explain that it was not just domestic celebrities, but also "celebrities from overseas [that] frequented the 'Citadel,'...according to legend, one of these was...Prince Louis Napoleon, nephew of the great

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<sup>52</sup> "Delmonico's New Restaurateur," *New York Evening Post*, September 21, 1837, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 10.

emperor.”<sup>55</sup> The coverage in the press of celebrities visiting Delmonico’s served as a potent symbol. It signaled that Delmonico’s was acceptable to the genteel class. Without other famous people eating at Delmonico’s, how was a man of society to know if it was acceptable to dine at Delmonico’s? It also meant that Delmonico’s could be used as an effective marker in society of refined tastes. If Louis Napoleon, an important member of the Old World aristocracy, had dined there, then Delmonico’s must be a restaurant fit for royalty. Because he dined there, diners could appropriate the experience and use it to say something about themselves. In essence, they were a part of the “American aristocracy.”

These dual phenomenon, of glowing reviews by newspapers and coverage by newspapers of celebrities frequenting Delmonico’s provided a boost to Delmonico’s bottom-line and social standing in the city. Even though some old Dutch and English rejected Delmonico’s because of its very nature, others were reluctant to go because they either did not know about its existence or did not know whether it was a socially acceptable place to dine at. These articles alleviated these societal problems, and opened up Delmonico’s to new clientele.

### ***Youth in Revolt: The Popularity of Delmonico’s with the Young***

Of course, Delmonico’s could not convince everyone that French food was good food, especially because French and English cuisines were diametrically opposed. However, the backlash that Delmonico’s created in the conservative Dutch and English communities actually worked in their favor. Many young men found, as we see in each generation, that their parent’s and grandparent’s views were stifling and unfounded. One way in which the youth differentiated themselves from the previous generation was in embracing the newly introduced French cuisine and accepting the idea of gustatory pleasure. Through the youth of New York City, Delmonico’s was able to cultivate the clientele that they relied upon for the next few decades.

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<sup>55</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 43.

Abram C. Dayton, in his memoirs of Knickerbocker New York, speaks at length about this phenomenon among the young. He says that the youth “were on the lookout for something new...[and] at once acknowledged the superiority of the French and Italian cuisine as expounded and set forth by Delmonico.”<sup>56</sup> But, Dayton also says of these visits to Delmonico’s that

unusual secrecy [sic] was indispensable, for if detected, we were certain to incur the marked displeasure of our grandmother, and to be soundly berated in the first place for our foolish extravagance, and secondly, pitied for our lack of taste by giving preference to ‘such vile greasy compounds,’ which we were assured would destroy our stomachs.<sup>57</sup>

He also states that his “old fogy ancestors would have pronounced unprincipled,” these visits to Delmonico’s, but “in spite of the well-meant warnings we repeated our visits whenever we could do so.”<sup>58</sup> In essence, going to Delmonico’s for Dayton was a rebellion against traditional ideals, and was a way to break away from the past generation. He was not the only one, because little by little he “inducted others into the secret that good things to eat could be had at the little cook-shop on William Street.”<sup>59</sup> In this way, the popularity of Delmonico’s among the young grew slowly but surely.

Another early-adopter of Delmonico’s was Sam Ward, the man who was considered “King of the Lobby” after the Civil War. He visited Delmonico’s in his youth, during his studies at Columbia. Before his death, Sam Ward prepared a manuscript about Delmonico’s to which Lately Thomas had access. In this manuscript, he speaks about his first visits to Delmonico’s, saying “I remember entering the café with something of awe, accompanied by a fellow student from Columbia...I reveled in the coffee, the chocolate, the bavaoises, the orgeats, and petits gateaux and bonbons.”<sup>60</sup> This glowing review was from someone who had been subject to a

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<sup>56</sup> Dayton, *Last Days*, 114-15.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Samuel Ward, “Memoirs,” or “Unpublished Notes for a History of Delmonico’s,” quoted in Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 15.



harsh, Puritanical upbringing. Like Dayton, this was a young man's rebellion that continued in adulthood. Ward, like Dayton, remembers especially Delmonico's in his old age.

Luckily for Delmonico's, many patrons rebellion during the youth mellowed into loyalty for their eating establishment for years to come. This stock of young, well-to-do patrons grew up into wealthy members of the community who introduced their sons, business associates, and fraternal organizations to the pleasures of a table furnished by Delmonico's. Delmonico's rose to prominence with them, and as illustrated in the final chapter, also fell into ruin with them.

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter was to establish the revolution of Delmonico's affected through the lens of entrepreneurship and society. On the business side, Delmonico's differentiated itself by creating an environment conducive to the growing practice of entertaining clients, giving the customer choice in a dining environment previously devoid of choice, and by creating a front-of-house experience that exuded cleanliness, sophistication, and quality. In terms of society, Delmonico's was able to convince a predominately Dutch and English city, through concession and gastronomy, to accept French food, as well as courting the youth of the city by introducing them to rich sauces and the pleasures of eating. Delmonico's bolstered its reputation by catering to celebrities and bringing in the press to support their cause.

In its formative years, we see Delmonico's establish the business strategies and clientele that will make it successful for years to come. Although its first incarnation pales in comparison to later forms, it still contained the core values that made Delmonico's into the pinnacle of American fine-dining: classical French cuisine, attentive service, cleanliness, and quality. The young men of its formative years grew up to become its most loyal customers during its golden age. In the next chapter, we will see exactly how these basic principles evolved into a more

modern Delmonico's under the next generation of leadership of Lorenzo, Siro, and Charles Delmonico.

Perhaps of largest importance to the overarching story of the creation of the modern restaurant is the sheer size of this change in the 1830s. Delmonico's restaurant was radically different from any other dining option that had been seen previously in America. It was so different that it was seen as alien to many of the morals of Old New York and was not really considered as a serious business model until it achieved fame. Delmonico's was as disruptive to the restaurant industry as word processing and personal computers were to the typewriter industry. Although changes were slower to realize in the nineteenth century, we eventually see that the choice that Delmonico's championed prevailed. Hotels were forced to concede their grip on the dining industry and to compete with Delmonico's by offering choice and convenience. Today, it is almost impossible to imagine a hotel that forces a patron to eat a set meal at a set time, and pay for it. Although the link has been obscured through time, it was Delmonico's that put these events in motion.

## Chapter 2

### The Golden Age – 1848 - 1896

#### Introduction

In 1848, Peter Delmonico finally sold off his remaining interest in Delmonico's to his nephew, Lorenzo, and entered retirement.<sup>1</sup> With this transfer Delmonico's entered into a new phase in its history, the years of Lorenzo the Great. Under the leadership of Lorenzo Delmonico, the Delmonico family expanded their locations and achieved international acclaim. In the process, they catered to the rich and the famous and made quite a fortune. The years between 1848 and 1896 were ones of refinement for Delmonico's. While it was in 1831 that many of the principles of their business were first established, it was not until Lorenzo took over that these were refined into a state more recognizable in modern dining culture. These were times of turmoil and disaster for the country, of enormous booms and devastating busts, but through it all, Delmonico's remained and prospered. In many ways, these are the years that defined the Delmonican experience, and with it the path of modern American dining.

Through the lens of both entrepreneurship and society, this chapter examines why Delmonico's prospered. Through the lens entrepreneurship, it explores how Delmonico's successfully segmented the New York City fine-dining market in a way that allowed it to expand without draining revenue from its already existing locations. Next, it shows how the impact of the new leader, Lorenzo Delmonico, on the best restaurant in New York City. Lastly, this chapter explains why Delmonico's reputation for consistency and reliability were important.

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<sup>1</sup> Lately Thomas [Robert Steele], *Delmonico's: A Century of Splendor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 60.

In the society section, this chapter delves into the interaction between Delmonico's and American society. First, it shows how Delmonico's was frequented by fraternal and other organizations for gatherings. This brought Delmonico's more bottom-line business, introduced new patrons to Delmonico's, and associated the restaurant with the idea of celebration. Second, this section of the chapter illustrates the part Delmonico's played in helping patrons express their individualism in the face of a stifling Victorian culture. This phenomenon changed the relationship between the proprietor and the customer in ways that helped to form modern American restaurant culture. Third and finally, this section discusses how Delmonico's was a battlefield between old wealth and new money, and why this was important to Delmonico's success.

## **Entrepreneurship**

### ***Splitting up the City: Delmonico's Strategy of Market Segmentation***

In a city the size of New York, there is naturally room for many different restaurants to cater to many different tastes. Depending on where they were located in the city, it may have been more convenient to cater to a particular taste. By the harbor, a restaurateur may cater to a more plebeian diet than he would if he were located in the heart of the business district. Within restaurants, segmentation also occurred, especially in locations the size of Delmonico's. This section examines the business impact of Delmonico's choice to segment their clientele based on location in the city, section of the restaurant, and time. By placing their restaurants both uptown and downtown, Delmonico's was able to capture the fashionable classes, government officials, and businessmen. Within the restaurant, by including a men's room, both public and private dining rooms, and ballrooms, Delmonico's was able to segment their offerings to meet the many different needs of their patrons. Finally, the time of day or day of the week served as a final way

to split and expand their market. Lunchtime was for the hurried businessmen while dinner was for the fashionable. Through these types of segmentation, Delmonico's was able to protect, and expand, their bottom-line.

Before discussing the types of segmentation that Delmonico's employed, it may be instructive to briefly review the concept. Segmentation is an analysis tool that is most often employed when developing strategy. Segmentation can occur through many variables, depending on the purpose and scope of the analysis. For this analysis, it is used in the opposite direction. Instead of using it to determine a strategy, it is used to understand the strategy that Delmonico's employed. The essential part of segmentation analysis is to choose the variables of segmentation. For this analysis location, on-site sections of each location, and time of day are important. These variables can help to determine how Delmonico's segmented the market, served each segment effectively, and why it was successful.

The first variable is how Delmonico's placed each new restaurant. The locations were used to help each restaurant acquire its own character and clientele. As Lately Thomas explains in his history of Delmonico's, 1856 was the year that Lorenzo "moved uptown with the tide, to the corner of Broadway and Chambers Street, opposite the City Hall."<sup>2</sup> By 1865, Delmonico's had locations on Fifth Avenue, Chambers Street, in the Bowery, and on Broad Street. These locations were spread evenly around the city so as not to steal clientele from any of the other locations. As Thomas explains:

Each Delmonico's specialized in serving a distinct clientele. The Fifth Avenue house drew the world of society; the Chambers Street restaurant attracted the politicians, lawyers, merchants, and judges around City Hall; the 'Citadel' [the location across from the old Stock Exchange] catered to bankers and shipping men and brokers; and 22 Broad Street developed its own enthusiastic custom among the stock speculators of Wall Street.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 70, 74.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

Through this format, each part of the wealthy members of New York City's population could have a Delmonico's of their own. Each location developed a distinct character, but was still uniquely tied to Delmonico's. For example, because 22 Broad Street brought in many stock speculators, the atmosphere was more raucous and liquor-infused than the staid and quiet Fifth Avenue location. This created a community attachment and kept members of society who may be antagonistic to each other separated. Lorenzo had a knack for choosing the right location for every restaurant. With each new location placed correctly, the right customers would frequent the location without starving the other location of its customer base.

The second segmentation variable is seen best inside, rather than outside the restaurant.

In Sam Ward's manuscript, as referenced in *Delmonico's: A Century of Splendor*, Sam remembers the Chambers Street location:

'While dry goods clerks and lawyers' scribes lunched at one counter in the outer room, contractors, aldermen, and pothouse politicians drank *à l'Americaine* at the opposite one. Within, there was a great dining room for the small dealers and the more thrifty of the large ones from the neighboring streets; and the really superb and luminous *salle à manger* [dining room] overhead was frequented by men of distinction in every pursuit and profession, save the Church'<sup>4</sup>

In essence, what Sam Ward found was the less wealthy were apt to sit in the men's room, essentially Delmonico's bar. There they would drink and have a sandwich or something relatively inexpensive for dinner. This room would have been quite lively, full of loud conversation and friends. The wealthier would eat in the dining room on the ground floor. Separate tables and the type of clientele lent itself to a quieter atmosphere that was more conducive to client meetings or just a relaxing, long lunch. Above this main dining room, on the next floor was another dining room and private rooms for the even wealthier. Sometimes, political parties used these dining rooms as bases, or the ultra-wealthy used them because they wished for a private place to enjoy a meal. Finally, a place not mentioned by Sam Ward, but one of the most important rooms of the

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Ward, "Memoirs," or "Unpublished Notes for a History of Delmonico's," quoted in Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 74.

building was the ballroom or banquet room. Each location had at least one ballroom that was used for large parties, dancing, and buffets. These were the location of fraternal meetings, discussed later in the society section, as well as high-profile events, like dinners for visiting dignitaries or even sitting presidents. Out of the three variables, the segmentation within the restaurant is most important. While a restaurateur can control the quality of food and service, they have little control over how their customers act, something rather unique to the restaurant business. It is not hard to imagine a time in a restaurant where another table was too loud, or was just rude. The people in the restaurant can thus change the dining experience of others. On the opposite spectrum, an empty dining room can be just as disconcerting. By creating spaces in which each type of customer could express himself or herself appropriately, Delmonico's was able to expand its business while still pleasing each type of customer.

The third and last segmentation variable to examine is that of time. Depending on the time of day different clientele may be seen dining. For example, the Chambers street "restaurant was the resort of a busy, haranguing, expansive crowd at midday, while at night a different type of customer filled the table... The politicians and the law clerks might usurp it during the day, but in the evening the 'best people' took over – people who knew how to dine."<sup>5</sup> Although this was not something that Lorenzo consciously enforced or built into the system, it had similar affects to segmentation through space. Different times of day brought different clientele looking for different experiences. As mentioned, the lunch crowd was looking for a sandwich, or something similar, and a drink. The dinner crowd was looking for multiple courses and an artistic meal. If these types of customers mixed, it could have meant disaster for Delmonico's because of their vastly different needs, but time of day helped keep them separate. In the same way, day of the week helped Delmonico's meet the needs of different types of customers. On a Friday and Saturday night, the whole city was out looking for entertainment. The theater crowd descended

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 74-75.

upon Delmonico's. This type of clientele was vastly different than the wealthy families who came to Delmonico's for Sunday dinner. Time effectively kept these different types of patron separate while still allowing them to enjoy Delmonico's table.

Segmentation was the only way that the Delmonico's could grow and remain prosperous. Without creating different locations, and different spaces within them, it would have been impossible for them to fill their dining rooms to make a profit. Understanding that the customer is part of the dining experience, even in a restaurant as exclusive and private as Delmonico's, shows just how important segmentation was to creating harmony inside of Delmonico's and forming ties to the community outside of Delmonico's. Through location, space, and time Delmonico's was able to create this harmony and expand their profits.

### *A New Leader for Delmonico's*

In 1848, a new head was placed in charge of the Delmonico's empire, Lorenzo Delmonico. Lorenzo, nephew of Peter and John, "came to New York in 1831, at which time they had, in addition to the William-street restaurant, a kind of hotel on Broad street, corner of Marketfield."<sup>6</sup> He was brought up in the restaurant business starting from the age of 19. Early on, he showed his prowess and eventually convinced his uncle Peter to give him the remaining portion of the business to run on his own. Thomas describes Lorenzo thusly: "[he] virtually personified the institution that bore his name. In the annals of the family he richly deserves to be styled Lorenzo the Great, for it was he who...lifted Delmonico's into international renown."<sup>7</sup> Because Lorenzo was what many observers thought defined Delmonico's, understanding Lorenzo can aid in understanding Delmonico's, the restaurant.

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<sup>6</sup> "Dining at Delmonico's," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 15, 1876.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 63.



At the time of his death in 1881, the *New York Times* said of Lorenzo that “he was enterprising...sharp-witted, quick to discover an advantage and earnest in its pursuit.”<sup>8</sup> In 1860, just twelve years after he became sole proprietor of Delmonico’s, the *New York Herald* said “it is no disparagement to his uncle [Peter] to say that he has surpassed him.”<sup>9</sup> These articles are written during the times of some of the greatest men of industry America has ever seen like Vanderbilt, Rockefeller, and Carnegie. As much as these men of industry, Lorenzo was respected for his business prowess and recognized for his success in taking over the family business. He brought the Delmonico restaurants through many trials including a fire in 1845, the Civil War, and the depression of the 1870s. Delmonico’s not only survived, but grew, even in 1860 on the eve of the Civil War. Understandably, it took a man who embraced risk to create an “establishment by far the most perfect of its kind in the United States.”<sup>10</sup> Building a restaurant on the eve of Civil War was no small risk, especially with the elaborate adornments that were proposed. This gamble turned out well for Lorenzo, and “the building which he has rendered, by his good management, [became] more widely known than any eating house in America, and a fitting rival to Very’s or the Frères Provençaux.”<sup>11</sup>

The way Lorenzo ran the business tells us why he was deserving of such high accolades. Lorenzo “held himself accountable for every department of the four restaurants, and in company with Siro supervised daily marketing.”<sup>12</sup> The daily marketing included going down to Washington Market, most times before the sun even rose, and picking the best fruits, vegetables, and meats to be used in the restaurant that day. Lorenzo knew that Delmonico’s reputation was built on its quality, and he actively controlled that for almost forty years. Thomas also notes that “Lorenzo’s

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<sup>8</sup> “Lorenzo Delmonico Dead: The Busy Life of the Great Caterer Ended,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1881, 7.

<sup>9</sup> “The Failure of Delmonico’s,” *New York Herald*, February 4, 1860.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 164.

insistence upon exactitude in every detail of the business was a source of amazement to his friends.” Thomas goes on to explain how Lorenzo showed a messenger boy, who was to take lunch to a businessmen at his office, how to wrap a pastry correctly in paper.<sup>13</sup> Lorenzo shows incredible drive and uniquely understands that at Delmonico’s the details count. Lorenzo, with the aid of Charles and Siro Delmonico, made sure that every patron’s experience was treated with sincerity and an acute attention to detail.

However, not all risks turned out well for Lorenzo. Reporting in 1860, the *Herald*, stated that “Some years ago some clever people undertook to make oil out of coal, and formed a company for the purpose,” and Lorenzo Delmonico was one of four wealthy men that bought in.<sup>14</sup> This business imported coal from Scotland and converted it into an illuminating oil, similar to kerosene. Although the business seemed initially prosperous, by 1860, Lorenzo announced that he would default to his creditors for the loans he had taken for the coal oil business. “The oil speculation caused him a loss of over \$500,000,” and he was forced to put all of his property, including the Delmonico’s restaurants, up for auction.<sup>15</sup> The *Times* goes on to explain that “when the day of the sales came, however, his creditors refused to accept his sacrifice, and unanimously declared that ‘Delmonico’s was an institution and must remain.’ No bid was offered, and Lorenzo Delmonico was permitted to continue in his business.”<sup>16</sup>

This anecdote is quite puzzling, but also gives us the reason for Lorenzo’s immense success in the restaurant business while being inept in another industry. He had a unique ability to personally connect with his clientele. According to the *New York Times*, “in the language of a leading banker, ‘Delmonico, sir, is not an individual; he’s an institution.’”<sup>17</sup> The *Chicago Daily Tribune* agrees, saying “these guests were all personal friends of Lorenzo Delmonico, and the

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 152.

<sup>14</sup> “The Failure of Delmonico’s,” *New York Herald*, February 4, 1860.

<sup>15</sup> “Lorenzo Delmonico Dead,” *New York Times*, September 4, 1881, 7.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> “The Failure of Delmonico’s,” *New York Herald*, February 4, 1860.

greetings between them were always cordial.”<sup>18</sup> Thomas also lends credence to their personal relationships, saying that “many old New Yorkers counted him a friend,” and “outside business, Lorenzo Delmonico had become one of New York’s foremost citizens,” even being elected to the New-York Historical Society.<sup>19</sup> Although all businesses are somewhat reliant on creating cordial relationships, the restaurant business is absolutely dependent on it. Lorenzo was most adept not at investing in other businesses, or managing costs and shipping for coal, but in forging these ties with his most important patrons at Delmonico’s.

Lorenzo was the soul of Delmonico’s from the time Peter left in 1848 until his death in 1881. Lorenzo taught through action that quality and detail were important. If the person running the business took time to market everyday, then these things must be important to all employees. Although the daily aspects of business were still important, it was really Lorenzo’s presence and his ability as a cordial host that made Delmonico’s successful. His personal relationships sustained Delmonico’s even through its darkest moments and elevated it to its pinnacle.

### ***The Most Reliable Caterer in Town***

Delmonico’s was renowned not only for the quality of its food and presentation, but also for its ability to host banquets and parties on a moment’s notice. Simply put, it was the most reliable caterer in New York City. This ability not only translated into bottom-line profits for all of the Delmonico’s locations, but also helps us understand why the place was so beloved. People’s fondest memories included Delmonico’s, because Delmonico’s catered many of society’s grandest events. Whether it was a wedding, or just a party, Delmonico’s probably handled the food and décor. It also sheds further light on the personification of Delmonico’s, it was trusted like an old friend instead of being treated like a business.

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<sup>18</sup> “Delmonico’s: Interesting Anecdotes Concerning Some of the Noted Men Who Were Wined and Dined There,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 6, 1881, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 171, 153.

Stories abound that testify to its reliability. Below is reproduced a portion of the story from the *Milwaukee Sentinel*:

The late Col. Fisk was not a regular patron of Delmonico's...on one occasion at half-past 4 p.m., he called at the office. 'Charley,' said he, 'I want a tiptop stand-up lunch, with flowers and all that sort of thing, served in the Erie building for 150 men at half-past 6.'

'That's two hours from now.'

'Well, a great deal can be in two hours.'

'All right, Colonel, I'll do it, but it will be an expensive job for it.'

'Who said anything about the cost? You do it and I'll pay for it.'

Of course the lunch was served and equally of course the \$1,500 bill was paid.<sup>20</sup>

And another:

When Tweed's daughter was to be married the old man called on Delmonico two months in advance, and, without mentioning terms, simply said: 'I want a supper, good one, for my daughter's wedding: 500 people. Good-day.' The day after the supper was served he called and paid for it.<sup>21</sup>

Both Colonel Fisk and Boss Tweed give Delmonico's very vague requests and demand perfect execution within a small time frame. In both situations Delmonico's (somewhat miraculously in Colonel Fisk's situation) delivers.

These anecdotes are a testament to how much people trusted the discretion of Lorenzo and his relatives Siro and Charles. Of course, it was their profession to cater events and large banquets, but these stories go a further than professional trust. Tweed's anecdote shows a level of trust that far exceeds a professional relationship. He put his daughter's wedding reception, for 500 people, completely in the hands of Lorenzo! Similarly, Colonel Fisk was comfortable with giving few instructions but having grand expectations. That these expectations were met proves the point, Delmonico's was the most reliable caterer in town.

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<sup>20</sup> "Dining at Delmonico's," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 15, 1876.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

## Society

### *The Place to Meet: Fraternal Organizations and Delmonico's*

It is hard to look through primary sources about Delmonico's without noticing a pattern. Time and time again, there are announcements and stories covering the annual meetings of organizations in Delmonico's dining rooms. Organizations both small and large would frequent one of the Delmonico's locations once a year, or maybe even once a month. Their size and purpose may have ranged, but they all brought something in common to Delmonico's. Besides the obvious, income, these groups also brought new patrons, served as free advertising for Delmonico's, and most importantly, created a link between Delmonico's and celebration.

Many types of organizations held gatherings at Delmonico's. The sheer number and variety shows just how important these customers were for Delmonico's business and attest to the reach and power of the Delmonico's name. In *The Epicurean*, Charles Ranhofer lists menus from his most famous meals. Included are dinners for groups such as the Pioneers of California, the St. Nicholas Society, the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, St. Andrew's Society, Ohio Society, and the St. George Society. There are also dinners for professional groups, like the New York Press Club, the New York Police, the First and Second Panel Sherriff's Jury, Bulls and Bears Annual Dinner, and the 125<sup>th</sup> Annual Banquet for the New York State Chamber of Commerce.<sup>22</sup> These society groups ranged the spectrum from philanthropic to fraternal to business to old friends just trying to keep in touch.

When these groups came to Delmonico's, they introduced more people to the pleasures of Lorenzo's table. People who may not have normally gone to Delmonico's, either because they had no reason or because they lived far away, were able to see what all the talk was about. More

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Ranhofer, *The Epicurean: A Complete Treatise of Analytical and Practical Studies on the Culinary Art* (Chicago: The Hotel Monthly Press, 1920), 1088-1136.

than introducing people, though, these big organizational meetings planted fond memories in patrons' minds about Delmonico's. This was a powerful influence the next time they thought of where they might want to go to dine and the next time an organization picked where they wanted to hold their annual dinner.

Another feature of these big organizational dinners was the press they brought for Delmonico's. For example, "among the regulars I count 'Sorosis'. Not that Sorosis spends any considerable amount of money at its little lunches or even at its annual festivity; but Sorosis is a feature of the age, and therefore a feature of any place it makes its home."<sup>23</sup> Sorosis was an all-women's organization that met and discussed subjects deemed taboo for women. According to Thomas:

The sole objective of Sorosis was to bring together women of ability and inquiring minds who were interested in the world around them, and provide an outlet for their intelligence, which heretofore had been cooped up within the confines of the home and social and family preoccupations.<sup>24</sup>

By Delmonico's holding their monthly luncheons, they brought the attentions of the newspapers and signaled that they were part of the new age.

These organizational meetings were the lifeblood of Delmonico's. First, they brought in a lot of income because of the size of the party and the festive atmosphere. Second, they introduced new patrons to Delmonico's and left them with fond memories. Hopefully, these memories brought them back to Delmonico's for another celebration. Thirdly and finally, organizational meetings brought attention to Delmonico's. Constant newspaper attention kept Delmonico's in the public eye and relevant to a changing culture.

### ***The Change from Host to Server and Guest to Customer***

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<sup>23</sup> "Dining at Delmonico's," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 15, 1876.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 141.

An oft-overlooked, but very important principle that was created by the restaurant concept was a change from host and guest to server and customer. This was not just a change in semantics, but rather a fundamental change in the relationship between the proprietor and customer in the dining space. As discussed in chapter one, before Delmonico's the proprietor held almost all the power of choice. In essence, the proprietor was a host and the diner was the guest. Although hosts were committed to making a diner comfortable they were still the final arbiters, and a guest did not often express individual taste and preference. While the introduction of the restaurant concept changed the balance of power to favor the diner, it was not until after the Civil War that its effect becomes pronounced in the diner. In the intense competition between the old and new rich after the Civil War, and the coming of the Victorian era in America, American diners start to express individual taste at the dinner table.

To accurately judge the how dining was affected, it is important to orient it in the early American dining landscape. During that time, the diner's choice was scarce, both in where a diner could find a meal, and what the diner could chose of his or her meal. In a boardinghouse of ill-repute, both breakfast and dinner were usually small and unappetizing. At a hotel or more expensive boardinghouse, the quality of the meals was much improved, but the quantity was usually too small to fill an American stomach. What links all these dining establishments, is the fact that it is the proprietor who makes the food choices for the diner. Another link, more important to present analysis, is that whether it was "copious [or] scarce, the mealtime spread literalized social relationships between host and guest in a way that linked abundance with hospitality as a display of good will."<sup>25</sup> It was the host who displayed his or her desire to please, in either creating an enviable spread or merely feeding her guests. The diner was unable to express desire. Today, this concept is so foreign to restaurant culture that another example may be

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<sup>25</sup> Heather Lee, "Selfish Consumers: Delmonico's Restaurant and Learning to Satisfy Personal Desire," in *Food for Thought: Essays on Eating and Culture*, ed. Lawrence C. Rubin (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008), 183.

instructive to show the size of this change. During the time of the early incarnations of Delmonico's, it was virtually unheard of for a patron to send back food in a hotel or boardinghouse dining room. It was seen as an insult to the host and the house. Today, patrons think nothing of sending food back to the kitchen, and proprietors endeavor to correct the error.

With a basis in early American dining culture, it is easier to judge the change in dining brought by the restaurant concept. The introduction of the à la carte menu opened up to diner's a plethora of choice that had never before been seen. In essence, Delmonico's forced the diner to choose his meal from a large menu of options. The diner could not only chose which dish he or she wished to eat, but also in what order. With this choice, it was only natural for diner's to demand exactly what they wanted to eat, even to the extent of giving orders to the server and the chef. An illustrative example of the extent of this choice in Delmonico's, although not in choosing what to eat, is the story of the invention of Lobster Newberg. "One day in 1876, home from a cruise, [Ben Wenberg] entered the café at Madison Square and announced that he had brought back a new way to cook lobster. Calling for a blazer (a chafing dish with spirit lamp), he demonstrated his discovery by cooking the dish beside his table, and invited Charles Delmonico...to taste."<sup>26</sup> Charles Delmonico allowed Mr. Wenberg to cook a new dish in his dining room, giving the diner absolute control. This contrasts sharply early New York City dining, which imposed both time and content constraints on meals. Another entrepreneurial change that affected choice was the private table and private dining rooms. As opposed to a long boardinghouse table, diners in Delmonico's were able to pick where they sat at their *own, private* table. If they were in a private dining room, they were even able to shut the restaurant out and create their own space. Just like the example of Mr. Wenberg, diners were able to control some aspects of the dining environment. Maybe a more important implication is one that is subtler. If diners are sitting only with their friends or family, they are more apt to express their choice

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 221.



because they are more comfortable. To the extent that the boardinghouse table allowed choice, a diner had the additional burden of overcoming sharing his private wishes among strangers. Finally, as Delmonico's grew to its Bowery, Fifth Avenue, and Madison Square Garden locations, the host became more diffuse. Although one may spot Lorenzo, Charles, or Siro Delmonico, it was the server who had most contact with the table. Because of this, impediments to sharing personal choice were easier to overcome. It was no longer an insult to the host to complain, because the server was a member of the house specifically meant to ingratiate himself to you. Again, this is a contrast with the boardinghouse table where a diner's wishes would be directly shared with the proprietor, a much more intimidating prospect.

These entrepreneurial changes introduced or developed by Delmonico's certainly accounted for some of the change from host and guest to server and customer, but it was necessary for the overarching culture to support these changes. This is where Victorian morals help to fully explain the change. In some respects, Victorian culture was stifling, especially to the sexual desires of men and women. Individual wants were quashed for the purpose of societal good and moral enlightenment. However, the dining table was one acceptable way to express individual wants and show pleasure. In other words, it was "in restaurants [that] New Yorkers had a context for exercising self-interest."<sup>27</sup> Although Delmonico's was a main factor in moving restaurants into the business of customer gratification, it was the overarching culture, which encouraged members to show their desire in this context. Instead of patrons looking for a place to merely meet their needs for food, the Victorian era ordered that "satisfying gastronomic desire was the objective of dining out; patrons got whatever they wanted, whenever they wished it."<sup>28</sup> Because Victorians were unable to express their desires in many other ways, they were desperate to find a context where they could appropriately share their desire. Delmonico's created

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<sup>27</sup> Lee, "Selfish Consumers," 182.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

“interactions between employees and customer reinforced the idea that diners had license to desire,” however, it was because of Victorian culture that “dinner was transformed into a leisure activity.”<sup>29</sup> In this context, “what diners desired became the primary goal of the meal, and the host became the servant. Eating out in restaurants evolved into a form of entertainment that celebrated individual taste.”<sup>30</sup> It was also one of the few places where a Victorian could express pleasure. They could express pleasure through commenting on the artistry of the offerings, through the gusto with which they ate, or through displaying their ample girth from enjoying many fine meals. Dining out was the perfect context to express desire in a Victorian culture, because it allowed choice tempered by the ritual of dining.

Even though it was the many business changes that Delmonico’s implemented in its early years, the à la carte menu, private tables, and servers, it was only with Victorian culture that the restaurant truly changed from host and guest to server and customer. The Victorian culture encouraged patrons to understand the restaurant as a place where choice was acceptable and where pleasure could be expressed. This culture, and Northern prosperity after the Civil War encouraged another phenomenon at Delmonico’s.

### ***The Battle for Delmonico’s: Old Wealth versus New Money***

Delmonico’s was the place for society to meet and eat. But after the Civil War, with the number of wealthy expanding from war profits, it became a battleground between old wealth and new money. With it came the rise of Ward McAllister’s and Mrs. Astor’s Patriarch Balls, to assert the power of the 400 members of the old wealth over New York society. Among the old families who gathered at Delmonico’s “were the Van Burens, the Howlands, the Aspinwalls, the

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<sup>29</sup> Lee, “Selfish Consumers,” 186.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 182.

Jays, the Stuyvesants and the Fishes...[but] new faces appeared at the tables”<sup>31</sup> These new faces, in opposition to these old New York families were the profiteers who tried to lavishly spend their way into the 400. Whatever implications this battle had on society, Delmonico’s profited. This section contemplates the underpinnings of this rash of spending and what factors arose in society to warrant such displays of extravagance in the beginnings of the Gilded Age.

Although there were other ways of conspicuous consumption, a concept theorized by Thorstein Veblen, none was more public than holding a dinner at Delmonico’s. Treating guests to expensive and exotic treats, entertainment, and having it all reported the next day in the society section of the newspaper was one of the best ways to show you had arrived. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported in late 1884 about an “evening [where] Mr. Blaine was entertained at a dinner in Delmonico’s by 200 millionaires representing capital to the amount of \$500,000,000...the dinner was arranged by Mr. Cyrus Field and Mr. Jay Gould.”<sup>32</sup> This sort of dinner was not uncommon to Delmonico’s, where “one young man spends thousands of dollars there every year.”<sup>33</sup> Because Delmonico’s was considered as the best restaurant in America, there was no better place to conspicuously consume than at Delmonico’s.

However, it does not necessarily follow that dining would be way to conspicuously consume. Something must have changed to recognize dining as a legitimate way to conspicuously consume. As recently as 1840, “during the Van Buren administration, a meal served at the White House in the new French style became a political issue...congressmen attacked it and the royal style it represented.”<sup>34</sup> Obviously, part of the problem with the Van Buren dinner was his position as president, but it still follows that extravagant dining was frowned on recently in the popular

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<sup>31</sup> John Walker Harrington, “Downtown Delmonico’s Goes, But Not to Be Forgotten,” *New York Sun*, December 9, 1917, 7.

<sup>32</sup> “That Delmonico Dinner,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 15, 1884.

<sup>33</sup> “Dining at Delmonico’s,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 15, 1876.

<sup>34</sup> Wendell Schollander and Wes Schollander, *Forgotten Elegance: The Art, Artifacts, and Peculiar History of Victorian and Edwardian Entertaining in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 7.

conscious. However, "in the restaurant, public eating was reconceptualized as art with pretensions to the status of paintings and literature... no one said he dined at Delmonico's for health reasons."<sup>35</sup> Delmonico's became a place to display both wealth *and* taste. Hypothetically, someone could display a work of art in their home and show it off to guests. But that was not very conspicuous, especially since it was confined to only those who came into the home. On the other hand, one could go to Delmonico's and order the finest things on the menu and publicly consume in front of everyone else in the dining room. Obviously, this second scenario was much more public and became one of the preferred methods of consumption.

Because of this new type of public consumption was now celebrated, "others in the same set [attempt to] emulate...extravagance as far as their inherited or borrowed wealth permits."<sup>36</sup> This emulation led to the battle between old wealth and new money, and a race to establish status. Naturally, "men pinned their reputations and pledged fortunes to beating one another at a game whose only limit was man's creative ability."<sup>37</sup> An example of this type of competition are the Silver, Gold, and Diamond dinners thrown at Delmonico's. It was a conscious attempt by three men to outdo each other over three consecutive dinners. Another would be the Luckemeyer "Swan Dinner." When Luckemeyer received \$10,000 windfall from the United State Government in a tax return, he decided to throw a large party that included a lake and swans in the middle of the dining room and a cage built by Tiffany and Company.<sup>38</sup>

Precisely because of the elevation of dining to art and the rise of new wealth, Delmonico's became a battleground between the two groups. If old feelings about extravagant meals had persisted, the battle for social status would have played out much differently, and in a different arena. However, because Victorian culture valued the rituals of the table, and allowed

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<sup>35</sup> Lee, "Selfish Consumers," 186, 189.

<sup>36</sup> "Dining at Delmonico's," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 15, 1876.

<sup>37</sup> Lee, "Selfish Consumers," 191.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 148-49.

individual expression at the table, Delmonico's was able to reap the reward as the outlet for conspicuous consumption.

### **Conclusion**

The "Golden Age" of Delmonico's was as much a product of the times as it was of the person. While Lorenzo Delmonico made strong connections with his patrons, this alone could not have accounted for the restaurants' tremendous popularity. Part of it was also the way the business was run, placing an emphasis on segmentation to keep patrons happy while expanding the reach of Delmonico's. Another part was the ability of Delmonico's to please wealthy patrons with vague demands. Their expertise afforded them the business of the ultra-wealthy, and also made them famous for their reliability.

On the side of society, Delmonico's was successful because it became the trusted place for organizations to meet. This not only brought bottom-line profit, it also brought new patrons into the fold with fond memories of their experience. Delmonico's was also able to switch the perception of the times, from host and guest to server and customer. This gave Victorians the ability to satisfy themselves in a way that did not challenge the prevailing morals. Finally, because food was now seen as art and because of the battle for social dominance between established and new wealth, Delmonico's became the public arena for conspicuous consumption.

These social trends, however, did not arise out of nowhere. In part, they were a creation of Delmonico's. Delmonico's created spaces around the city for people to gather and eat. Delmonico's helped to reconceptualize dining as art, with the help of chef Charles Ranhofer. By introducing French classical cuisine in the restaurant format, Delmonico's only heightened the allure of consuming at Delmonico's. This allure stemmed from the ability of Delmonico's to package the experience of the European aristocracy into a meal of just a few hours. Although this

type of dining may have arisen without Delmonico's, it was Delmonico's who introduced it to America.

## Chapter 3

### Dining at Delmonico's: An Examination of a Famous Meal

#### Introduction

One of the main arguments of this examination has been Delmonico's essential role in the creation of the modern restaurant. The first chapter, examined the introduction of the à la carte menu, Delmonico's deferential service, and the adoption of French classical cuisine by businessmen. These factors help to explain the larger movements in the restaurant industry. However, we still have not developed a firm idea of what was actually served, in what order, and in what manner. By examining a meal from a diner's eye view, we will be able to better answer these questions and better understand Delmonico's from the perspective that most people experienced it. To understand Delmonico's from this perspective, I've selected a representative meal from Delmonico's history, Sir Morton Peto's extravagant dinner given on October 30, 1865 at the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue establishment. Before addressing Sir Peto's meal, this chapter explains the two major influences on the American style of service. Then, it walks through the entire meal, from the reception to the after-dinner tea. This chapter will help to establish a more concrete link between Delmonico's and the modern American restaurant.

#### Two Competing Styles of Service: The French and the Russian

Before diving into Sir Peto's dinner, it is important to ground our examination in the influential styles of service in postbellum America, the French and the Russian style. Both arose from the European aristocratic household and, at their core, were a series of elaborate rituals meant to convey affluence and power.

The French style consisted of three basic ‘services’ (or courses): hors-d’œuvres, roasts, and desserts. Each course consisted of a variety of dishes. Charles Ranhofer, the executive chef at Delmonico’s for over 30 years, explains the typical French service in his monumental work, *The Epicurean*. The hors-d’œuvre stage is composed of hors-d’œuvres, soups, removes, and entrées. Following the hors-d’œuvres is a palate cleansing punch or sherbet, and afterwards come the roasts, vegetables, and other side dishes. Just as today, dinner ended with dessert, which usually consisted of cakes and bonbons, fruits, and cheeses.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the entire meal, the wines served depended upon both the means of the host and the food being consumed. The meal usually concluded with a dessert wine or a liqueur, the obligatory cigar, coffee, and tea. In the French style, each course would contain between six and eight separate dishes. All the dishes would be brought to the table together, providing the table with an abundance of food for each service. It was the host’s responsibility to carve and pass for each person in the party. As you can imagine, carving game birds or whole fish was an important task for the host, but could also be quite challenging.<sup>2</sup> After each service, the tablecloth would be stripped away, revealing the one underneath, the table would be reset with the necessary items for the next service, and the table would be filled with more food.<sup>3</sup> The idea behind this system was to show the wealth and generosity of the host through sheer quantity of food on the table at once. In the modified version of the French style, still somewhat common in the 1890s, the host would even have his servants parade the entire roast or fish past all the diners to show them its size and opulence before they brought it back to the sideboard to carve.<sup>4</sup> However, maybe even more important in showing wealth was the quality, rarity, and artistry of the dishes and service. For example, "to serve

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Ranhofer, *The Epicurean: A Complete Treatise of Analytical and Practical Studies on the Culinary Art* (Chicago: The Hotel Monthly Press, 1920), 9.

<sup>2</sup> In the French style, it was custom to roast, poach, or bake meat, game, and fish whole to display size and quality.

<sup>3</sup> It was common in the French style to use the tablecloth as a napkin since it would be removed and replaced for each course.

<sup>4</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 9.



grapes [and] oranges...while the snow laid high on the ground outside was a sign of wealth and taste. The tsars often showed their wealth and power in this way."<sup>5</sup> This combination of quality and quantity was what typified a successful French service. The focus was on the richness of the table that the host could provide for his guests.

Before we move on to the demise of the French style and the rise of the Russian style, a note should be made on the subject of entrées. According to historians Wendell and Wes Schollander, "the use of the term 'entrée' for secondary dishes is confusing as today it refers to the main dish of the meal."<sup>6</sup> The main course in the French style was not the entrée, but the roast. Even though this was true, in Ranhofer's time it was the entrée that was "the 'high-water' mark of the meal."<sup>7</sup> The succession of entrées was the way a chef would show his mastery of the ingredients, his ability to create a pleasing mixture of tastes and textures, and his artistry in presentation. Entrées were meant to tantalize the taste buds while preparing them for the roast. At Delmonico's, entrées were widely varied, and could be served hot or cold.<sup>8</sup> Because Americans considered entrées their favorite part of the meal, the vernacular gradually changed to accept the use of 'entrée' for the main course of a meal.

However influential the old French style was, it would be difficult to find a modern restaurant that still serves this way. As Ranhofer states in the 1890s, "the old style of French service threatens to disappear entirely and is rarely used."<sup>9</sup> In modern America, it has all but disappeared from the restaurant scene, which favors an Americanized Russian style. The closest approximation to French style service may be the Thanksgiving meal. Although it does not follow

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<sup>5</sup> Wendell Schollander and Wes Schollander, *Forgotten Elegance: The Art, Artifacts, and Peculiar History of Victorian and Edwardian Entertaining in America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Schollander and Schollander, *Forgotten Elegance*, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> See Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 675 for more examples and recipes of entrées.

<sup>9</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 8.

the French order of courses, it does show the wealth of food on the table all at once, centers the roast as the main event of the meal, and requires the host to carve and pass the turkey at the table.

With the culinary tradition being so steeped in French cuisine, it may be hard to fathom why the Russian style of service supplanted the French. One factor, as Charles Ranhofer notes, was that “the entrées are apt to lose much of their finer qualities by the very act of being cooked and dressed beforehand, then kept hot in...chafing dishes.”<sup>10</sup> Another reason was that if the food was not kept in a heater, it was apt to be cold before the diner was ready to eat. Still another reason was the “general desire of the day...to dine quicker” as well as “first-class families [ceasing] to make a display of the great luxuriousness indulged in” the French style, which required a great many chefs and servants.<sup>11</sup> Combined, these factors help to explain how the shortcomings of the French style contributed to its demise as the dominant style of service.

The “change to service à la Russe took place in the 1860s and 1870s” in America, and, although modified, has lasted to the present day in one form or another.<sup>12</sup> This was the basic style in which Sir Morton Peto’s meal was served in 1865. While it was not a conscious attempt to dethrone the French style, the Russian style did fix some of its most glaring problems. In the Russian style, instead of serving an entire course at once, it was served in individual portions, one dish at a time. This meant that dishes came out of the kitchen hot and fresh, instead of slowly losing flavor in chafing dishes. In addition, instead of the host carving at the table and serving each guest, a servant carved at a sideboard away from the table. Having the servant carve took pressure off of the host, but also deprived him of his ability to choose which piece went to which diner. Also, the Russian style required that the table be set for multiple dishes from the outset, with a plethora of silver and glassware. Each place setting contained the necessary utensils for the meal, with multiple forks, knives, spoons, and glasses. For those who were rich enough to host a

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<sup>10</sup>Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 9.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Schollander and Schollander, *Forgotten Elegance*, 154.

dinner party, this was another way to show wealth and good taste in addition to the all-important centerpiece. In the French style, the centerpiece was considered all the food being set on the table. Since tablecloths were changed multiple times throughout the meal, it was impractical to have anything elaborate, heavy, or delicate that had to remain on the table. In the Russian style, centerpieces evolved, and were usually large floral arrangements, sugar sculptures, or fruit displays. Relative to the French style, “table decorations were more important. These elaborate decorations were left on the table throughout the entire meal, and the tablecloth was not removed. Since no one wanted to see a tablecloth soiled by one's neighbors wiping their greasy hands on it, napkins became a real necessity.”<sup>13</sup> So not only did the Russian’s expand on making the table beautiful, they also made dining more hygienic and cultivated. The Russian style, however, did not substantially change the order that food was served in or the type of food served. Although the French style may have shown wealth through abundance of food, the Russian style showed wealth through an abundance of skilled help, the elaborateness of the table decorations, and the more complicated ritual. French cuisine was still highly coveted, but it was the Russian style of service that showed the most sophistication.

The French and Russian style were both influential in postbellum American dining. Although they went about it in different ways, their ultimate purpose was to show affluence, status, and power through the ritual of dining. The aim of this section was to show the unfamiliar exactly how Victorian’s could do this at the dinner table and the reasons behind it. Showing status was especially important in America, a country devoid of an established aristocracy. In the end, the Russian style won out. This style, which was further tweaked to the American palate, was how Sir Peto’s grand meal was served in 1865.

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<sup>13</sup> Schollander and Schollander, *Forgotten Elegance*, 153.

### Sir Morton Peto's Meal<sup>14</sup>

With an understanding of these two types of services, we can finally proceed to Sir Morton Peto's meal. As described in the *Cleveland Leader*, Sir Morton Peto, otherwise known as "the Railway King," was a very important Englishman.<sup>15</sup> He was described in 1865 as, "a member of Parliament elect...Chairman of the London Board of Directors of the Atlantic and Great Western Railroad," and the employer of "one hundred thousand men."<sup>16</sup> Sir Peto and his associates had come to America to inspect the railroads they had financed as well as to look for more opportunities to invest in American industry. On Thursday, November 2, the *Norfolk Post*, reported on Sir Peto's going away dinner from the preceding Monday, October 30. They shared that about 520 guests were in attendance, only 20 of them women. The notable attendees included Chief Justice Chase, Admiral Farragut, Generals Hooker, Dix, Schenk, and Sweet as well as other prominent politicians and railroad men. The evening's entertainment not only included an immense showing of delicacies, but also a concert by Miss Clara Kellogg and "other eminent artists."<sup>17</sup> According to Lorenzo Delmonico's reminiscences in 1876, the costliest meal ever served at Delmonico's was Sir Peto's at \$15,000 (about \$200,000 in today's dollars).<sup>18</sup> The dinner was served "à l'Américaine," a designation made by Charles Ranhofer to describe the type of service common to America, which slightly tweaked the Russian style. As we go through Sir Peto's dinner we will see just what Ranhofer meant by this designation.

Before dinner actually began, Ranhofer explains that there is typically a reception. For Sir Peto's meal, the guests who arrived early gathered in a reception room outside of the main

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<sup>14</sup> See Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 1080 for full menu reproduction.

<sup>15</sup> "Our English Guests," *Cleveland Leader*, September 11, 1865, 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> "Sir Morton Peto," *Norfolk (VA) Post*, November 2, 1865, 2.

<sup>18</sup> "Dining at Delmonico's," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 15, 1876, 2.

Samuel H. Williamson, "Seven Ways to Compute the Relative Value of a U.S. Dollar Amount – 1774 to Present," *MeasuringWorth*, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/> (accessed April 2, 2014).

dining room. This was probably on the second or third floor of the restaurant where the large banquet rooms and private dining rooms were located. As each guest walked in, a waiter or a lady's maid, depending on the gender of the guest, would take his or her coat, hat, cane, or other garments not needed for dinner. A waiter would hand each gentleman an envelope containing the name of the lady he was to escort into the dining room. There being only twenty ladies in attendance, the men who received a card must have been picked with care by the host. In the reception room would be more waiters, passing beverages out for the thirsty. Ranhofer cites "sherry, Xeres, bitters, vermouth [sic], and absinthe" as standard for the American diner in addition to mineral water and cocktails. When all of the guests had arrived and the dinner hour was struck, the steward would open the doors to the dining room and the procession began.<sup>19</sup>

This procession into the dining room was an important and planned part of the meal. Each gentleman would line up with the lady he was to escort. Tradition dictated that the first people to set foot into the dining room were the hostess and the male guest of honor. Although the record is unclear on whom the male guest of honor was, it is probably safe to assume that it was one of the notables mentioned by the newspaper. The last person was always the host, which means Sir Peto would have been the last to file in. In between the hostess and the host, the other guests filed in. As they came in, guests looked for a card bearing their name "on the right hand glass" of each setting at each of the many tables. Where people sat at their tables was also governed by the rules of polite society. Certain people, like foreign guests, government officials, or the elderly would take seats nearer to the head of the table. For example, if you were an older foreign dignitary, you would probably be to the right or left of the head of the table. If you were younger, or less well established in business or government, you would be nearer to the end of the table. While it is hard to know exactly where everyone sat, it is likely that Sir Peto and the guests of most import occupied seats at a raised table at the front of the dining room, evoking the

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<sup>19</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 6.

traditional imagery of a medieval court. Others would have been placed at tables throughout the rest of the large banquet room.<sup>20</sup>

As the guests took their seats, “upon a silk cushion embroidered,” with his or her name, they would find their tables already set and elaborately decorated.<sup>21</sup> On the table, Ranhofer suggests:

a large piece of silverware decorated with plants, ferns and natural flowers, or else a high vase or a simple basket of flowers...on each side of the centerpiece...two prettily arranged baskets containing seasonable...fruits...on each side of these...an ornamental piece...on each end of these pieces...either candelabras or lamps, and beyond these high stands of graduated tiers filled with bonbons<sup>22</sup>

The ideas for these decorations were kept in the translation of the Russian to the American style of service. Interspersed in all of this were decanters, menus, rolls, different relishes and condiments, and salt and pepper cellars. There were also vases filled with flowers to pin on for both the gentlemen and ladies. On the sideboard, away from the table, the desserts as well as all of the wines were tastefully arranged. Of course, the table would also include a plethora of glassware and silverware for each guest. It was normal to have four to five glasses set out per diner and multiple forks and knives, sometimes tailored specifically for a task, like eating an oyster or carving a game bird.<sup>23</sup>

Before walking through each part of the menu for that evening, a few notes must be made about this analysis. The evening would have lasted in excess of three hours. Ranhofer portions about ten minutes per course, but including speeches, toasts, and entertainment, the evening would have lasted much longer than Ranhofer’s two hour estimate (ten minutes per course for

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<sup>20</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Lately Thomas [Robert Steele], *Delmonico’s: A Century of Splendor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 147.

<sup>22</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

twelve courses).<sup>24</sup> Also, when Charles Ranhofer would design a menu he would sometimes give it a theme to match the occasion. For example, when New Yorkers hosted President Andrew Johnson in 1866, Ranhofer served *filet de bœuf à la Pocahontas*. From his own list of almost four thousand recipes, this preparation of filet never appears. Although it was most likely a classic preparation that was renamed to fit the occasion, it is unclear what exactly he served. The dinner hosted by Sir Morton Peto was no exception to this rule, so some themed dishes may remain forever a mystery. For this reason, and because there were a total of twelve courses and thirty-eight dishes served, describing each dish properly is beyond the purview of this brief explanation. My hope is that an explanation of one or two dishes from each course will not detract from understanding just how elaborate, complicated, and spectacular this dinner truly was.

After everyone had taken their seat, the steward and his waiters sprung into action, and the meal was immediately served. The first course served at Sir Morton Peto's grand meal was the *huitre*, or oyster. Oysters, even across the Atlantic, were a traditional part of the meal. Although "oysters were at one time regarded as a luxury...they [were] almost as indispensable as tea or coffee" to the average New Yorker in the 1850s.<sup>25</sup> During the time of Sir Peto's meal, raw oysters were a common food to find being sold by street vendors, like the hot dog or pretzel of today. Although it isn't quite clear how Ranhofer prepared them, it was traditional to serve raw oysters on the half shell. He instructs that six to eight oysters should be served per portion, on finely crushed ice, with a quarter of a lemon. Crackers or thin bread and butter can be included as well hot sauce, a *mignonette* (a shallot and vinegar mixture), or a *pimentade* sauce (a sort of tomato sauce with finely chopped onion, pimento, veal, and ham).<sup>26</sup> For a meal this size that would mean around three thousand oysters were served. Even though that seems like a large

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<sup>24</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> "The Oyster Trade of New York," *New York Weekly Herald*, March 12, 1853.

<sup>26</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 362, 312.

number, in 1853, the oyster business of Virginia, New York, and New Jersey accounted for about \$5.2 million.<sup>27</sup> Three thousand oysters barely made a dent in this immense business.

Today, oysters have somewhat returned to their luxury status owing to overfishing and pollution. New York and Virginia still remain large oyster producers, but the West coast and the New England area are also significant. While it is not hard to find a restaurant that serves oysters, they are no longer a part of every restaurant's menu and have fallen out of favor as the traditional way to begin a meal. As opposed to the nineteenth century, is not hard to imagine a twenty-first century meal that does not include oysters.

According to tradition, "one clear and one thick soup should be selected" for the second course, *potages*.<sup>28</sup> Alessandro Filippini, a former chef at Delmonico's, explains how service would commence: "It should be made a rule never to remove any plates while some of the guests are still eating. When all have finished, remove the oyster-plates and leave dinner-plates in their stead; then serve the soup...Always serve the plates on the right side, and remove on the left."<sup>29</sup> Seeing as it comes from a Delmonico's source who was working there around the time, this was probably how dinner progressed. In this instance, Ranhofer followed his own advice by serving *consommé Britannia* and *purée à la Derby*. Guests were able to choose one or the other.<sup>30</sup> Because a recipe for the *purée* does not exist, our examination will focus on the clear soup. A *consommé* is made by clarifying a stock with a "raft" composed of meat, vegetables, herbs, and egg whites. As the egg whites solidify, they catch all the particulate in the stock and slowly form a raft that floats to the top. After it is finished cooking, the *consommé* is strained leaving a flavorful, concentrated liquid that is extremely clear. A diner should be able to see the bottom of his bowl if the *consommé* is prepared properly. According to Ranhofer's recipe, *consommé*

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<sup>27</sup> "The Oyster Trade of New York," *New York Weekly Herald*, March 12, 1853.

<sup>28</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Alessandro Filippini, *The Delmonico Cook Book : How to Buy Food, How to Cook It, and How to Serve It* (London: Brentano's, [189?]), 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 7.



*Brittania* used a fish *consommé* that was garnished with asparagus tops and a combination lobster and *velouté* (a white sauce created by combining a pale roux and chicken stock) forcemeat and chicken and cream forcemeat.<sup>31</sup> The soup and garnish would be brought to the table in a small *consommé* cup, and a tureen with more fish *consommé* would have accompanied the small cup for any diner that requested more liquid.

Although soups are a common feature of almost all restaurant menus, the *consommé* is only seen nowadays at restaurants serving classical French cuisine. What is most striking is its preparation, marrying the garnish and the liquid only before serving. Garnishing a soup in the French style is foreign to America. More common to the American palate are thick soups or rich stews. The soup course today would come out with or after the hors-d'œuvres, not before, and is not truly a separate course. Diners sometimes choose between eating a soup, a salad, or an appetizer.

After diners finished their soup, the hors-d'œuvres, or appetizers were served. Although sometimes the appetizer course was split up into *chaud* and *froid* (hot and cold) offerings, this menu made no distinction. Because there is usually this split, the diner is able to pick either the hot or cold.<sup>32</sup> The hors-d'œuvres for Sir Peto's meal consisted of *cassolettes de foies-gras* and *timbales à l'écarlate*. *Timbales* are molded, stacked, usually savory, appetizers in a shape reminiscent of a thimble. The concept of the napoleon is similar to *timbales*, but the napoleon is less refined in shape and is usually not as highly decorated. *Timbales à l'écarlate* were a savory *timbale* consisting of a beef tongue outer layer with a chicken cream forcemeat filling. They were

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<sup>31</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 249, 294, 190. Forcemeat is made by pounding out meat and forcing it through a sieve, literally making it a forcemeat. It is combined with binders and seasoning and poached in a mold, similar to a meatloaf.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

served with a chicken liver, truffle, white wine, and *espagnole* sauce on the side.<sup>33</sup> Even though it was small in size, this *timbale* would have been quite a rich appetizer.

Appetizers today are just as varied today as the appetizers that Ranhofer prepared in the 1860s. However modern appetizers are usually lighter, less garishly decorated, and in a much more natural form and texture. For example, the closest that we come to a forcemeat today would be meatloaf, but even meatloaf is quite a poor substitute. Finally, organ meat is not as prevalent today, even though it was essential in almost every dish served in Ranhofer's time, either as the main protein, in the sauce, or in a garnish.

After the appetizers, Ranhofer moved to the *poissons*, or fish. The fish course consisted of *saumon à la Rothschild* and *grenadins de bass, New York*. Once again, the diner is offered a choice and passed "the one preferred."<sup>34</sup> Besides containing bass, the content of the second fish selection is unknown. However, *saumon à la Rothschild* was most likely a poached salmon (traditionally in champagne) that was garnished in the Rothschild style. To garnish in the Rothschild style, Ranhofer used eighteen cocks' kidneys Villeroi, nine game *quenelles*, nine *escalops* of sweetbreads, nine *escalops* of smoked ham, nine *escalops* of foies-gras, and eighteen small, whole truffles. This extravagant garnish was not meant for each individual serving, but were scattered around in clusters on the large platter presented to the table. A brown Madeira sauce was poured over top.<sup>35</sup> Since this was a boiled fish, it was served with potatoes. On the other hand, fried fish was served with a cucumber salad.<sup>36</sup> This preparation of fish seems rich and complex, as well as extremely expensive and extravagant to serve to hundreds of guests.

The modern restaurant no longer has a course devoted solely to fish. The only time Americans would eat a whole piece of fish nowadays would be as their main meal, although fish

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<sup>33</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 398. *Espagnole* sauce is made with a dark brown roux and stock, see 294 for the full recipe.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

or shellfish may be a part of the appetizer or soup course. Also, it is much more common to find broiled, grilled, or fried fish as opposed to poached or boiled fish.

After the fish came the *relevés*, or the solid joints. This was usually where the beef and poultry were served, with game birds being reserved for the roast course. For Sir Peto's dinner, *chapons truffés* and *filet de bœuf à la Durham* constituted the *relevé* course. Again, Ranhofer does not include this particular preparation of filet, but gathering from a couple of recipes, we can decipher the other part of the course, *chapons truffés*. "A capon is a castrated cock fattened for the table."<sup>37</sup> From the fact that all the capon recipes that Ranhofer notes are for roasts, it is safe to assume that these capons were also roasted. After roasting, the capon was garnished with truffles either "in slices...olive shaped...in quarters...in small sticks...or else left whole."<sup>38</sup> Both the capon and the beef would "have one or two vegetables accompanying them."<sup>39</sup>

Again, this seems strange to the modern order of courses. If we were to eat both beef and game, they would either be served together or the lighter meat, the delicate game birds, would be served first. Another strange part of the menu is that it never mentions which vegetables were served with the meats, even though we know they were served with vegetables. This might be Ranhofer trying to conserve space on the menu (he liked to keep them small enough so that patrons could fit it in their pocket without have to fold them) or just because the meat, and not its accompaniment, was most important. In the modern restaurant, the vegetable is considered just as important as the meat and is listed and explained. Besides this minor point, and the fact that capons are rarely on the modern menu, this course is rather recognizable to the modern diner.

Finally, after four taxing courses, the hot and cold entrées are served. Entrées are almost like a second, more substantial appetizer course. The nine entrées that were served were: *faisans à la Londonderry*, *côtelettes d'agneau Primatice*, *cromesquis de volaille à la purée de marrons*,

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<sup>37</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 583.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

*aiguillettes de canards à la brigarde, rissolettes à la pompadour, volière de gibier, ballotines d'anguilles en Bellevue, chaudfroid de rouges-gorges à la Bohémienne, and buisson de ris d'agneau Pascaline.* Ranhofer served the entrées in this order starting with “the heaviest entrée, and [concluding] with the lightest...each entrée [was] accompanied by a vegetable, served separately.”<sup>40</sup> Ranhofer begins with pheasant, moves to lamb cutlets, then fried cow udders filled with chicken and crayfish, followed by duck breast, a game galantine, eel, and ends with a second lamb entrée. The *rissolettes à la pompadour* are a perfect example of an entrée. *Rissolettes* are “made with very thin pancakes...two and a half inches in diameter.”<sup>41</sup> After rolling out the *rissolette*, the *pompadour* style calls for a filling of beef and mushrooms in a *béchamel* sauce. The filling is locked into the *rissolette* by folding it over the filling in a half-moon shape. The whole concoction is then breaded and fried.<sup>42</sup> This process took considerable expertise and time to prepare.

Besides the preparations, the oddest aspect of the entrée course to modern eyes is probably the amount. After diners have ostensibly made it through an entire modern meal, they are then ushered into a hot and cold entrée, with vegetable side dishes, of meat, game, and fish. However, just like today, entrées were a way for the chef to showcase his talent.

In between the cold entrées and the roast, Ranhofer inserts a traditional palate-cleansing sorbet. He names it specifically for the meal, *sorbet à la Sir Morton Peto*, so the record is unclear as to what it may be. The type of sorbet he is referencing is a “water ice into which some liquor is mixed,”<sup>43</sup> usually kirsch and champagne. The ices were always fruit flavored, like apricot, peach, orange, or even pineapple and were probably a little on the sweet side. The alcohol was added before freezing to keep the concoction smooth through the freezing process. Each serving was

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<sup>40</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 2.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 1000.

about half a cup.<sup>44</sup> For Ranhofer, it was important to serve the sorbet in either “medium glasses...fancy cups...or in the peels of fresh fruits.”<sup>45</sup> After the sorbet was served, ten to fifteen minutes was given for a break before the next service. If no women were in the room, cigarettes could be offered to the men and smoked at the table.

The sorbet course is still seen at some fine-dining and European restaurants today and usually comes in much the same fashion. The sorbet is usually fruit flavored and is served in between courses to cleanse the diner’s palate. This bit of cold and sweet counterbalances the heavy or rich courses before and braces the diner for the next course to come. Although some restaurants may opt for just fruit, sorbet is still the most common type of palate-cleanser.

With the brief break over, Ranhofer moved into the *rôtis*, or roasts. “A game roast is usually preferred,” and in this case, Ranhofer delivered with *selle de chevreuil, sauce au vin de Porto groseilles* and *bécasses bardées*. In other words, Ranhofer serves a saddle of venison in a port wine and currant sauce and roasted woodcocks. Since no recipe for the woodcocks appears in *The Epicurean*, we will instead focus on the venison. The saddle comes from the hind portion of the deer and consists of the two loins that border the spine, generally considered to be very tender and flavorful. Ranhofer prefers males between 18 months and 2 ½ years, kids, or very young does and generally likes brown haired deer over red haired.<sup>46</sup> Because venison is one of the leaner meats, it was larded with larding pork and basted throughout the roasting process.<sup>47</sup> The inclusion of venison makes sense for Sir Peto’s meal. Deer has always been an aristocratic dish in Britain owing to the fact that land ownership was needed before people could hunt, kill, and eat deer.

Although it has become more popular in recent years, game is rarely, if ever on the menu in the American restaurant. Much of the variety on the menu comes from different fish, shellfish,

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<sup>44</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 1000.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 665.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 670.

or farm-raised meats. When it does appear on the menu, game is usually very limited to venison and a few choice game birds, like pheasant. Part of this is because of the small remaining populations, but even more, Americans have lost their desire for many wild types of meat. The focus has been on farm-raised, corn-fed meats although grass-fed has slowly been making a comeback.

After the roasts came the *entremets*, literally meaning between servings, of *chaux de Bruxelles*, *haricots verts*, *petits pois*, and *artichauts farcis*. In other words, Ranhofer served brussel sprouts, green beans, peas, and stuffed artichokes, but the menu doesn't specify any more than that. Even though Ranhofer has many different vegetable recipes, it is hard to tell exactly what was served. The artichoke dish would have probably resembled artichokes stuffed *à la Villeroi*. In this preparation, artichokes are stuffed with chicken forcemeat and herbs and covered in a Villeroi sauce. With this course, Ranhofer finally ends the savory and moves into the sweet.

It is somewhat odd to see vegetables come at the end of the meal, but it is seen in some Continental cultures. Italians have traditionally ended meals with a green salad before moving into fruits, nuts, and desserts. Vegetables have long been thought to aid in digestion, and may have been especially needed after such a rich dinner. In modern American restaurants, it is practically unheard of to end a meal or devote an entire course to vegetables. After the entrée, diners typically move into dessert and coffee or end their meal.

The *sucrés*, or desserts, were served last. On the menu, Ranhofer lists *pouding de poires à la Madison*, *Louisiannis à l'ananas*, *gelée aux fruits*, *moscovite fouettée*, *vacherin au marasquin*, *Mazarin aux pêches*, *caisses jardinière*, *pain d'abricot à la vanilla*, *gelée Indienne*, *cougloff aux amandes*, *mousse à l'orange*, and *glaces assorties*. In addition to these dishes, it was traditional to serve available fresh fruit as well as assorted bonbons. Obviously, dessert had quite an array of choice. *Pain d'abricot*, one of the desserts served, was basically an apricot gelatin. Ranhofer combines gelatin, almond milk, syrup, apricot purée, and kirsch and places the

concoction in a form to chill. He removes it immediately before serving and decorates with apricot halves and apricot marmalade.<sup>48</sup> He includes pictures of other types of *pains* for different fruits, and the presentation is rather elaborate, with pyramid forms and figures painted onto the gelatin. The apricot gelatin he served would probably have looked somewhat similar in style.

Dessert may be the most familiar course to modern eyes because of its focus on the sweet, but it still is not quite like today. Today's desserts focus less on fruit and more on different types of chocolates and baked goods. Because of the abundance of fruit, it is relatively easy to see why it might have lost its high-class appeal. The other noticeable difference is the inclusion of gelatins and puddings, something that is almost never seen. Jell-O and the ease of making these items at home have taken much of the luster from their appeal.

After dessert was served, the women would be led to the drawing room, where they would take their tea. Meanwhile, in the dining room, the men would sit, smoke cigars, and enjoy an after-dinner liqueur and a cup of coffee. After they had finished, they would join the ladies in the drawing room and also have tea. Although Ms. Kellogg performed at this meal, there was probably no dancing because the number of women prohibited it. Additionally, the performance by Ms. Kellogg was more in line with an opera or theater performance instead of something interactive like a dance. With the dinner service complete, Charles Ranhofer's duty was finished and the guests slowly filed out into the night.

## **Conclusion**

After looking through one of the most extravagant meals in Delmonico's history, one is left with a sense of awe, but also a sense of unease. Did they really eat all of that food? Food

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<sup>48</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 922.

historian Harvey Levenstein seems to think “most of it was indeed consumed.”<sup>49</sup> He cites the fact that “photographs of men attending these formal dinners provided ample evidence that they did not merely peck at their food. Row upon row of rotund white-clad bellies protrude...clear indications that girth and appetite were sources of pride.”<sup>50</sup> However, Levenstein does not touch on a few important points. First, even though there may be upwards of thirty items on a menu, most of the selections allowed choice between one item and the other, just like a modern banquet. For example, the soup course did not force a diner to eat both the clear and the thick, but to choose one. Second, Alessandro Filippini claims that the very purpose of a menu was to allow people to choose what they ate. “It is not a breach of etiquette to refuse a course you do not desire.”<sup>51</sup> That means that people could have declined a course if they were too full. Third, is another point by Filippini. He states that “while the guests are enjoying the sorbet, remove sherry, Sauterne, and Hock glasses, no matter if empty or full.”<sup>52</sup> In essence, if people did not wish to or could not, finish a dish or a course they could just leave the food on their plate. Levenstein’s point remains true, that people at these occasions and in general, did eat quite a lot, but they were certainly not compelled to eat everything on the menu.

Even though the meal’s contents are strange to today’s tastes, it was actually quite modern. The Russian style of service is still in use today, and was partly defined and popularized by Delmonico’s. Although the number of courses and their contents are somewhat foreign, their progression is still recognizable. American’s oftentimes have soup, oysters, or appetizers to begin a meal. They also often have fish, meat, or game as their main course with potatoes or vegetables on the side. Dinner often ends with dessert and coffee or tea, or an after-dinner drink. While the courses have certainly compressed, their content really has not changed since the 1860s. Even

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<sup>49</sup> Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Filippini, *The Delmonico Cook Book*, 20.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



with mechanization, fine-dining establishments still employ highly-skilled chefs to create and prepare dishes. The most important lessons to take away from Sir Morton Peto's meal are not the differences, but the similarities. The other important lesson, at least for our study of the modern American restaurant, is that it was Delmonico's who developed this concept and it was Delmonico's who first held these types of dinners.

## Chapter 4

### The Decline of Delmonico's – 1896 - 1923

#### Introduction

As the Gilded Age, a 30-year span known both for its opulence and Victorian morals, came to an end, the decline of Delmonico's became increasingly apparent. Although many of the societies and clubs that gathered at Delmonico's for their annual meal would likely not have concluded that the end was near for this New York institution, by looking through the same factors of society and entrepreneurship that ushered in Delmonico's most prosperous age, we can see how adverse changes in these factors led to Delmonico's unfortunate end in 1923.

In the first part, this chapter considers the role of entrepreneurial changes in Delmonico's decline. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Delmonico's lost important talent, including their head chef and other important pieces of the management structure. Along with this lack of management, Delmonico's was confronted with the shrinking availability and restricted access to the most coveted wild fish and game. They were also subject to increasingly sophisticated competition from new restaurants on both Fifth Avenue and Broadway. Finally, Delmonico's fell victim to the temperance movement spawned from World War I conservation, Prohibition, and therefore lost a significant portion of their ability to profit.

Next, this chapter explores how changes in society impacted Delmonico's. By examining the loosened morals in the increasingly popular cabaret style of establishment, we can see why conservative Delmonico's was unappealing to a new generation of diners. However, at the same time that Delmonico's stood as a citadel of conservatism, it also started to show cracks, where

losses of propriety became strikingly apparent. Finally, society become less approving of the opulence personified in Delmonico's, which is illustrated most notably in World War I conservation efforts. Unlike the preceding chapters, this chapter focuses on what factors spelled doom for Delmonico's instead of what factors made it prosper.

## **Entrepreneurship**

### ***Draining of Talent***

As the new century neared, Delmonico's was deprived of much of the talent that had sustained it. After 34 years of service to the Delmonico family, with only a brief stint running a hotel in France, Charles Ranhofer finally retired in 1898. The portly head chef had raised Delmonico's from merely a French restaurant in New York, to the best restaurant in the United States and quite possibly the world, while also inventing or popularizing many dishes that are still enjoyed today, like Lobster Newburg and Baked Alaska.

At the time of his death in 1899, he was lavishly praised. His obituary in the *Evening Times* hailed him as the "Culinary King Ranhofer" in the headline, and went on to declare him "the most influential chief cook in the United States." They also noted that he was the founder of the *Société Culinare Philanthropique* of which he was the honorary president at the time of his death.<sup>1</sup> The *Red Cloud Chief* proclaimed that "Ranhofer was now recognized as king of the world's chefs, and...was consulted by all the world's epicures."<sup>2</sup> Every year, the *Société* held a "competition...for the best food design" which included the best French chefs in the city creating elaborate culinary constructions, both savory and sweet, for the benefit of charity.<sup>3</sup> Being named

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<sup>1</sup> "Culinary King Ranhofer," *Washington Evening Times*, October 12, 1899, 6.

<sup>2</sup> "The King of Cooks: How he Made over \$100,000 in the Kitchen," *Red Cloud (NE) Chief*, November 2, 1900, 2.

<sup>3</sup> "Annual Ball of the French Cooks," *New York Daily Tribune*, January 30, 1894, 4.

president was quite an honor. The praise he received from journalists was not unfounded. In 1893, he published an incredible work of almost 1,200 pages entitled *The Epicurean*, with almost 4,000 recipes, a plethora of menus from famous dinners, and explanations about how and what is needed to run a successful restaurant. Clearly, Ranhofer was not merely a cook, but a *chef*, with a remarkable amount of accumulated talent and know-how. His departure was a sizeable loss for the restaurant, as there was no one in America, not even at Delmonico's, who could truly fill the shoes that had been left vacant. In his stead, he left his assistant of twenty years, Prosper Grevillot.<sup>4</sup> While the departure of Charles Ranhofer did not immediately lead to disaster, he was not the only loss that Delmonico's suffered at the turn of the century.

Charles Crist Delmonico, a former Wall Street broker and the last real restaurateur in the family, passed away in 1901 after 17 years of leadership.<sup>5</sup> After Charles Crist passed away, Delmonico's never saw another leader with both entrepreneurial skill and vision. Full management responsibility, and most ownership, was transferred to Rosa Delmonico, his sister. While she may have been interested in the viability of the restaurant, she held none of the skills required to effectively run it. In 1904, when Rosa passed away, the restaurant again changed hands, this time to her niece Josephine Otard Crist and her nephew Lorenzo Crist.<sup>6</sup> Josephine was given the majority stake in the company so management responsibilities fell to her. However, she seemed more interested in the prestige of owning the restaurant than actually keeping it viable in the twentieth century.

Beyond inadequate ownership, some important parts of the management structure were stolen by competitors or left for more enticing positions. In 1897, the maître d'hotel, Oscar Tschirky, accepted a management role at the newly opened Waldorf-Astoria. There he became

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<sup>4</sup> "Delmonico's New Chef," *Phoenix Republican*, December 20, 1899, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Andrews, "Delmonico's: The Restaurant that Changed the Way We Dine," *American Heritage* 31, no. 5 (August/September 1980), <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/delmonico's> (accessed April 2, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> "Rosa Delmonico Dead," *New York Sun*, March 26, 1904, 3.

world-famous for his management of Peacock Alley.<sup>7</sup> At Delmonico's, Tschirky had been in charge of the private dining rooms and even the outside catering business.<sup>8</sup> Rector's, the first building with a revolving door, also stole Delmonico's "*saucier*, [another] maître d'hotel, and business manager."<sup>9</sup> These were all essential members of Delmonico's business, with the *saucier* concocting the all-important sauces, the maître d'hotel managing the front of the house, and the business manager procuring funding. While Delmonico's had seen many of their former employees go on to start other restaurants or other careers (like their former head chef, Alessandro Filippini who went on to become a cookbook author and restaurant consultant), they had not seen this level of losses in such a short period of time.

While these critical losses in staff were an important part of Delmonico's decline, the larger problem was the lack of a talented, and innovative business leader. As a result of Josephine's inept leadership, Delmonico's was in dire financial straits. To be fair, "there had been premonitions of the catastrophe," years before Josephine was ever brought on board. "The value of Delmonico's, as a going concern, had shrunk to about \$60,000 from the million or more placed on it...in 1884."<sup>10</sup> The restaurant had been hemorrhaging money because of exorbitant rent, rising food prices, and heavy borrowing by family members. However, a report from the *Sun* during the 1906 court filings by Lorenzo Crist (who attempted to force a receiver so the business would be sold and his portion of the inheritance could be realized) suggested that Josephine was only making it worse; Delmonico's was in deep financial trouble. In 1904, accountants found that Delmonico's had a mortgage amounting to \$450,000 and additional liabilities of about \$421,000, owing partly to their recent 1897 expansion to Fifth Avenue and Forty-Fourth Street. They prophesized that "nothing but disaster could result if it were to continue." Only after the

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<sup>7</sup> Andrews, "Delmonico's."

<sup>8</sup> Karl Schriftgiesser, *Oscar of the Waldorf* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1943), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Andrews, "Delmonico's."

<sup>10</sup> Lately Thomas [Robert Steele], *Delmonico's: A Century of Splendor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 298.

accounting firm was brought in to manage Delmonico's and alleviate the strains of debt did the business return to partial solvency. Eventually, Josephine was able to win back her "right to manage the business as she," pleased after winning the court pleading.<sup>11</sup>

Two years later, in 1908, Josephine incorporated Delmonico's at a capitalization of \$500,000.<sup>12</sup> Josephine held all but two shares, one of which was held by the principal restaurant manager, Eugene Garniér, and another by her sister, Jeanne Delmonico. Although Josephine stated publicly that the reason for Delmonico's incorporation was because, "after four years of responsibility for the two great establishments...she [wanted] associates in the management," the reasoning seems suspect, especially considering her battle just two years earlier to gain back that right from the accounting firm.<sup>13</sup> From the many disastrous premonitions seen earlier, it seems as if Josephine was not disclosing the whole truth. She was never intensely a part of the day-to-day operations, which were mostly left up to Eugene Garniér until his retirement in 1914, so her claim to want more associates in the management does not make much sense. She already had as many as she wanted. It is much more likely that she wanted to protect her personal assets from the possible failure of the business, although it is still possible that she wanted to raise capital to keep the business afloat amid the ever-increasing sea of debt. However, this must have been a plan for a later period, because none of the shareholders at the time were from outside the family or the corporation.

Just ten years later, in October of 1918, Josephine no longer had a choice. Judge Hough ordered receivers appointed and Delmonico's fell into involuntary bankruptcy for their inability to pay \$799.15 worth of debt to creditors.<sup>14</sup> After almost fifteen years of squabbling in court between Josephine and her brother Lorenzo Crist, the worst outcome had finally come true. With

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<sup>11</sup> "Receiver for Delmonico's," *New York Sun*, November 15, 1906, 9.

<sup>12</sup> "Delmonico's Now a Stock Company," *New York Times*, November 28, 1908, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> "Delmonico's Now in Hands of Receiver," *Washington Herald*, October 5, 1918, 1.

the receivers' work after a few months, though, there seemed to be some slight hope for the continuation of Delmonico's. According to a January, 1919 decision by the New York District Court, "during the operation of the business by the receivers, all rent and taxes which have accrued during their occupancy have been paid. The business is substantial and there are about 200 employees," and they even posted an 11.5 percent profit margin in December, 1918. Judge Mayer gave them leave to continue running the business until it could be sold or a trustee named.<sup>15</sup>

The receivers did find one, rather unlucky soul, who wished to carry on the Delmonico establishments, Edward L.C. Robins. Robins was the first person outside of the Delmonico family to ever have a majority interest in the company over its close to one hundred year history. Quite portentously, the day he bought the restaurants was the same day "the national prohibition law went into effect."<sup>16</sup> With the advent of Prohibition, the profits that Delmonico's had seen under receivership were short-lived. After another public court battle, Mr. Robins lost a suit for non-payment of rent, which amounted to \$181,750.<sup>17</sup> After ninety-eight years of continuous operation, at midnight on May 21, 1923, Delmonico's closed their doors for good. As the *New York Times* explains on May 23, 1923, in response to the passing of Delmonico's, "the city had outgrown [it]...this, however, in no way lessens the regret that this old institution should have been forced out of existence."<sup>18</sup>

### ***Wild Game in Decline***

In addition to the loss of critical talent, another factor that led to the decline of Delmonico's was the dramatically reduced amount of wild fish and game that had once served as

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<sup>15</sup> In re Delmonico's, 256 F. 414 (S.d. New York 1919).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 327.

<sup>17</sup> "Delmonico's Ends Its Long Career," *New York Times*, May 20, 1923, 1.

<sup>18</sup> "Delmonico's," *New York Times*, May 22, 1923, 20.

staples of the Delmonico menu. As the historian, Paul Freedman, writes in his survey of American restaurant menus from the mid-nineteenth century, “the former abundance of American fish and game is striking, and the number of now unobtainable species cataloged on the myriad menus consulted demonstrates the essential poverty of the twenty-first century’s natural, as well as its culinary, environment.”<sup>19</sup> Paul Freedman’s assessment is well supported in *The Epicurean* where Charles Ranhofer constructs model tables of supplies for each season. Ranhofer lists over sixty types of fish and shellfish, including lake bass, tautog, lamprey, perch, porgy, shad, sheepshead, sturgeon, brook trout, and even codfish tongues, frogs, terrapin, and green turtle. He also includes thirty types of wild birds, antelope, bear, buffalo, and squirrel.<sup>20</sup> Not only does this inform us of an essential difference in modern dining and dining at the turn of the century, but it also informs us of the importance of wild game in even the finest restaurants.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, because of over-hunting and fishing, and more stringent hunting restrictions and enforcement, this all important game became much harder to come by. According to Lately Thomas:

The game laws had stricken from restaurant menus the wild fowl and venison that had once been common, and in 1917 that classic of American gastronomy, the canvasback duck, was immolated upon the altar of Mars when Army Ordnance took over for a proving ground the canvasbacks’ favorite feeding grounds in the Chesapeake Bay, where the wild celery grew.<sup>21</sup>

These game laws were seriously enforced, not just against the hunters and trappers, but also against the buyers and preparers. The blemish-free Delmonico’s was even charged under these laws in July of 1890, probably in an attempt to set an example for the industry. According to *Forest and Stream*, “the notorious Delmonico woodcock case...[was] for the offense of serving woodcock out of season.” They were later forced

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Freedman, “American Restaurants and Cuisine in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 1 (March 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Charles Ranhofer, *The Epicurean: A Complete Treatise of Analytical and Practical Studies on the Culinary Art* (Chicago: The Hotel Monthly Press, 1920), 14-23.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 329.



to pay a fine of \$450 for serving 18 woodcocks out of season.<sup>22</sup> Without this plethora of game to distinguish itself from competition, Delmonico's and restaurants of its kind lost their edge. This was not only in serving exquisite preparations of all sorts of wild game, but also in the convenience, variety, and availability. When diners of the time went to eat at a restaurant of Delmonico's caliber, they expected them to have the game they wanted, no matter what the season. Sadly, Delmonico's had to increasingly rely on the old standards of beef, veal, pork, lamb, and farm-raised fowl.

### ***A Changing Restaurant Landscape***

During the early twentieth century, and for many years previous, New York City was a center of intense investment and wealth. This made it easy to access capital for a large amount of entrepreneurs, including restaurateurs. According to a 1908 *New York Times* article by a curious Londoner, "the total number of millionaires in New York City alone rose from 28-1,103 between the years 1885-1892."<sup>23</sup> Some of the wealthiest people the world has ever seen also called New York home, like the Astors, the Vanderbilts, and the Rockefellers. Even more, "70 percent of the nation's major corporations were located in New York," as well as about a third of the nations trusts, and the leaders of the banking, insurance, shipping, and manufacturing industries.<sup>24</sup> Not only were they free in their spending of money on the finer things, but they were also free in investing that money in profitable ventures. With this constant access to capital, even restaurants, a relatively capital intensive industry with extremely high overhead and low margins were able to spring up in abundance. Surely this was due in most part to the exponential growth of wealthy and white-collar families in the city, which supplied the needed capital. It also helped that most

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<sup>22</sup> "Delmonico Pays \$450.00," *Forest and Stream: A Journal of Outdoor Life, Travel, Nature Study, Shooting, Fishing, Yachting*, April 6, 1893, 14.

<sup>23</sup> "A Londoner Among Us Taking Notes," *New York Times*, September 13, 1908, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis A. Erenberg, *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 36.

restaurants of the time were small, and locally owned. New York was considered, both in contemporary, and primary sources, the restaurant capital of America, and possibly the world. In 1894, there were 9,028 yearly liquor licenses given out, an astonishing amount even considering that saloons were included.<sup>25</sup> What had brought Delmonico's so much success, the brokers, financiers, and merchants that frequented their first establishment in the Bowery, were also now part of the reason for their demise. The wealthy men of the city were more than willing to finance new restaurant ventures all over the city.

During Delmonico's early days, the only real competition came from the Maison Doreé, but that threat was quickly inoculated when Lorenzo stole their star chef, Charles Ranhofer, from their kitchen in 1864. In the 1890s and into the 1900s, we see competition with an eye to the future move into the ever-expanding restaurant space. Sherry's posed the closest risk, and actually moved with Delmonico's in 1897 to their new location on Fifth Avenue and Forty-Fourth Street.<sup>26</sup> Another formidable competitor was the newly built (as of 1897) Astoria Hotel and its famous Peacock Alley. It took clientele from Delmonico's, because of its food, its renown as a place for the society-minded to see and be seen, and because "nothing like its luxury had ever been seen before, even the Waldorf was quite outshone."<sup>27</sup> According to an 1899 report in the *Salt Lake Herald*, "The Wall street men who had clustered [at Delmonico's for] so long transferred their trades...to the Waldorf-Astoria, where it now remains."<sup>28</sup> The Astoria Hotel also had another distinct advantage over Delmonico's. To meet the expenses of an enormous dining room, it catered to the emerging middle-class diner, thus spreading its chances for success over a

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<sup>25</sup> "Fewer Saloons and More Revenue," *New York Sun*, May 8, 1894, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 279-80.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 268.

<sup>28</sup> "Delmonico's Closed Forever," *Salt Lake Herald*, April 30, 1899, 21.

much larger populace.<sup>29</sup> That meant that even if its wealthy patrons abandoned dinner there, they still had many middle-class patrons to rely on.

Indirect competitors, like Churchill's, Shanley's, and other so-called "lobster palaces" along the Great White Way were able to corner some of the theater market by serving excellent food in a relaxed atmosphere, where men and women could mingle freely. In Lately Thomas' estimation, "the theatrical and night-life sets had...forsaken 'Del's' for gayer settings along Broadway."<sup>30</sup> Lewis Erenberg agrees, stating that "Broadway catered to the theatrical and sporting worlds' new money and the vast urban populace who wanted a good time."<sup>31</sup> These places were most popular with the younger, fashionable set who wanted a place showier and more risqué than Delmonico's could provide. Unfortunately, Delmonico's was stuck in the past. At this point, it was not only about moving with the city, but also moving with the trends of the fashionable class. The young that had found Delmonico's fashionable in the 1830s and 1840s were slowly dying off. The young of New York had moved on, but Delmonico's had stayed behind.

### ***The Effects of Prohibition***

Delmonico's had been known since its inception as a restaurant with an exquisite selection of wines. In fact, Delmonico's had an inventory valued at any one time at almost a quarter of a million dollars.<sup>32</sup> According to Charles Ranhofer's listing in his 1893 tome, *The Epicurean*, they carried 12 separate types of wine totaling to over 150 selections, including almost 30 different vintages of champagne.<sup>33</sup> This might not seem too amazing in the modern-

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<sup>29</sup> Andrew P. Haley, *Turning Tables: Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 122.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 281.

<sup>31</sup> Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Andrews, "Delmonico's."

<sup>33</sup> Ranhofer, *The Epicurean*, 1063-64.

day, but it is important to remember the Delmonico's would import these wines directly, between one hundred to three hundred bottles at a time, and store them in one of three cellars they had in the city.<sup>34</sup> They would not only have to keep an accurate inventory of all these wines, but also age them in the proper conditions. This was a monumental task that only paid off when people were drinking. In other words, wine made expensive, high-risk inventory.

This risk showed on Delmonico's bottom-line when the conservation movements of World War I spawned the improbable enactment and enforcement of the eighteenth amendment to the Constitution, Prohibition. The enforcement arm of Prohibition, the Volstead Act, prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcohol throughout the United States. This included sale even in the most luxurious and well-respected restaurants. At least one historian, Harvey Levenstein, cites this as the sole cause for Delmonico's finally shutting their doors. He is correct in identifying Prohibition as one of the deciding factors for both business and social reasons, but as we will see this was certainly not the only reason. According to Levenstein, "the great prewar hotels and restaurants relied on their bars for most of their profits...serving generous portions of food made with first-class ingredients at or below cost to attract customers who would also order high-margin wines and spirits."<sup>35</sup> Without this profitable part of their business to keep them afloat, the future looked dim indeed for Delmonico's. In 1918, when their assets and liabilities were appraised by the court, their wine stock had been reduced to about \$50,000, which included cigars and liquor.<sup>36</sup> When Prohibition neared ratification in January of 1919, Delmonico's ran "a small and discreet advertisement appearing in the newspapers" announcing the disposal of their vintage

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<sup>34</sup> "Delmonico: Reminiscences of a Famous Restaurant," *Burlington (VT) Free Press*, September 22, 1876, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 183-84.

<sup>36</sup> "Receiver Named for Delmonico's," *New York Times*, October 5, 1918, 17.

wines and fine liquors.<sup>37</sup> Certainly, Delmonico's sustained a significant financial loss from this fire sale, which only further propelled the already sizeable debt.

Because the Volstead Act outlawed the sale of alcohol, it also meant that the restaurant could no longer get its hands on the wines that made its dishes as exquisite as they were. As remarked at the time, "terrapin could not be cooked properly without sherry or Madeira," and many other dishes could not be prepared without the proper amount of wine to finish and flavor the sauce.<sup>38</sup> Even their food couldn't live up to the Delmonican standards they had instituted.

More than this loss on their wine and liquor inventory or even the food suffering from blandness, Delmonico's lost patrons to their own home-cooked meals, and presumably horde of liquor and wine. As Crispi, the captain of waiter in the café said of business during Prohibition, "sometimes they come for lunch, but for dinner they stay at home."<sup>39</sup> Celebratory or extravagant dining just wasn't the same without libations, and that exact type of dining was the cornerstone of Delmonico's business. A ball or banquet was held for just that reason, to celebrate. For evidence of the change, we need not look further than a dinner of the Old Guard organization, which Major Edward H. Snyder complained was "a very sad affair." The veterans attending "lifted their mineral water, [as] the band played 'How Dry I Am' and the drums were muffled."<sup>40</sup> The ambience left much to be desired. Joe, the proprietor of Greenwich Village's Black Cat restaurant, sums up nicely the attitudes concerning dining out during the age of Prohibition:

There is good talk and humor and good spirits. I don't for a minute flatter myself that it is my presence that does it. It is the wine. The atmosphere doesn't lie in the walls of the place...it is the effect of drinking just enough to forget the gloomy things of life. Without that everything here would be flat, stale, and unprofitable.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 329.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> "Old Guard Drinks Water," *New York Times*, April 23, 1921, 18.

<sup>41</sup> "Prohibition's Effect on Meals and Movies: Restaurateurs and Theatre Directors Discuss the Federal Amendment in Relation to Their Business," *New York Times*, January 19, 1919, 41.

It was no longer grand old Delmonico's. The men's café, where brokers, politicians, and sporting-types had once gathered to drink, smoke, and talk was radically changed. The dining room, full of the popping of corks and glasses full of wine was sadly silent and devoid of the celebratory energy that had once defined it. Although Prohibition certainly put a damper on society's events at Delmonico's, from club meetings to extravagant galas, society had already been abandoning Delmonico's for the gayer lights of the Great White Way or quieter meals at home.

## **Society**

### ***The Loosened Morals of the Cabaret***

At the turn of the century, America was finally relaxing its Victorian standards. A prime example of this moral loosening can be seen in the cabaret. Significantly, as the popularity of the cabaret grew, the crowds at Delmonico's dwindled. The cabaret was an idea born in Paris around the turn of the century, which quickly immigrated to America. Cabarets were a mixture between a restaurant, a vaudeville performance, and a dance hall. The Folies Bergies is commonly considered the first, albeit unsuccessful, American cabaret when it opened in 1911.<sup>42</sup> In the next year, the pre-World War I dance craze fueled the cabaret format's growth and the overall acceptance of public dancing again. Some establishments were built expressly to cash in on this craze, like the Castle House of 1913 built by the famous dance couple, Irene and Vernon Castle.<sup>43</sup> Others, like Churchill's, Shanley's, Bustanoby's, Murray's Roman Gardens, and Rector's opted to apportion a part of their space for a cabaret, but had already established themselves as "lobster

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<sup>42</sup> Erenberg, *Steppin' Out*, 115.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-61.

palaces.” These were restaurants with luxury cuisine, late hours, and a relaxed attitude towards the mixing of men and women.<sup>44</sup> At a cabaret, both men and women would sit down to drinks, and possibly some food, and watch a show. Then, they would either get up and dance or delight in watching others do the same. As the dance craze grew, cabarets also became a place to actually learn the new dances as they were being introduced.

Public dancing was not an invention of the cabaret. However, what was new was their break with the ballrooms and dances of old. As Lewis Erenberg succinctly points out:

The favored dances of the nineteenth century exhibited control, regularity, and patterned movement...the german, the cotillion, and lancers...were favorites at the exclusive Patriarch balls in New York City...these dances emphasized that individual pleasure arose from participation in hierarchy, social interdependence, and group unity.<sup>45</sup>

These dances represent what Delmonico’s, which actually played host to many Patriarch balls, represented for society at the turn of the century, Victorian conservatism. But the cabaret’s dances, like the fox trot and the tango, emphasized that individual pleasure came from becoming more intimate with your dance partner. The old way of thinking was being quickly eclipsed in the twentieth century, and it was not reserved to just the faster set. “Although the young made up a large bulk of the dancing crowd, they were not the only ones who danced in the public cabarets...the dance craze also drew on the impulses of older people.”<sup>46</sup> Parents and even grandparents might frequent the nicer cabarets of New York City.

This new form of entertainment contrasted sharply with Delmonico’s in other ways as well. One rule of the Delmonico house, that went above and beyond all their competitors was that “no two persons of the male and female sex, married or single, could dine together in a private

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<sup>44</sup> For a full listing of Manhattan cabarets between 1911-1920, see Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out*, 120-21.

<sup>45</sup> Erenberg, *Steppin’ Out*, 148.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

room with the door closed.” This rule extended even to one of the restaurant’s most venerable and respected customers, the Belmonts.<sup>47</sup> In the early 1880s, they finally allowed women into the restaurant before six in the evening unescorted. And in 1896, Charles Crist permitted smoking in the dining rooms when it “had [previously] been confined to the men’s café.” This concession only came after women complained about waiting while their husband’s smoked at the bar and pointed out that it was already the rule in Europe.<sup>48</sup> But these small changes in policy were too little and too late to actually bring in a younger crowd, and may have even alienated the older members of society who were the core of their regular clientele. On the other hand, cabarets allowed women to smoke, dance in pairs, flirt, and even sometimes order their own drinks at the women’s bar. These places were more relaxed, free, and in-line with the expectations of the times, which left Delmonico’s with only a dwindling older generation to rely on.

### ***A Loss of Propriety***

Even more than the mismanagement of funds, Delmonico’s suffered from a mismanagement of image. Through three accounts spanning the early twentieth century, we can see how the Delmonico name lost some of its luster. During the golden age of Delmonico’s, Lorenzo had built their restaurant empire on the firm ground of propriety. He had constructed a safe place in the Victorian world for men and women to socialize together in public and still be able to preserve their reputation. The elaborate set of rituals, the aura of European aristocracy, and the spoken and unspoken rules of Delmonico’s gave women the freedom to have a meal in public without threatening to tarnish their carefully constructed image. On the other hand, establishing an account at Delmonico’s meant you had arrived as a man in New York society.

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 132.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.



Delmonico's was considered by many "the citadel of conservatism, and like its patrons was growing more conservative."<sup>49</sup>

As the twentieth century dawned, Delmonico's began to exhibit traits that were opposite of this image of gentility. Delmonico's very publicly sued a Nassau Street lawyer for not paying his bill of only \$181.70, a miniscule amount for a business so large.<sup>50</sup> This was unprecedented in Delmonico's history, as the *Salt Lake Herald* states, "it is a notable fact that Delmonico has never sued a customer for food supplied."<sup>51</sup> Even when they were in grips of bankruptcy in 1918, it was said that it "was considered bad policy" to urge payments on outstanding debts, which had reached about \$50,000 by that point.<sup>52</sup> Through Lorenzo's established practice, of not collecting debt but denying further service to patrons late on payment, thousands of dollars were certainly lost. However, it also meant that many financially unsound patrons were blacklisted from the restaurant without breaking the code of privacy between host and guest, which was inherent in a civil suit. As Thomas hypothesizes, "that such had ceased to be the policy of the house spoke volumes for those who could read the signs."<sup>53</sup> Thomas goes on to cite the financial woes of Delmonico's, but this event speaks to more than that. Delmonico's biggest asset had always been the reputation of their name, which evoked images of quality, conservatism, and opulence. This publicized case suggested something quite at odds with that mentality, even if events such as these were rare. It portrayed Delmonico's as cheap.

This court case was miniscule compared to the long, drawn-out legal battle between niece and nephew. Immediately after the death of Rosa Delmonico, Lorenzo Crist was cited in the *Sun*

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<sup>49</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 292.

<sup>50</sup> "Judgment Against Stephen C. Baldwin," *The American Lawyer*, Vol. 7 (January-December 1899): 350.

<sup>51</sup> "Delmonico's Closed Forever," *Salt Lake Herald*, April 30, 1899, 21.

<sup>52</sup> "Receiver Named for Delmonico's," *New York Times*, October 5, 1918, 17.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 284.

as saying “he will probably have charge of the restaurants.”<sup>54</sup> But soon after, the will of Rosa told otherwise, when two-thirds of the restaurant, and control of daily operations went to Josephine. The animosity between the siblings, and the well-intentioned spirit of Rosa’s friend, the co-executor, Albert Theriot, played out over almost fifteen years until Delmonico’s was transferred to receivers in 1918. This animosity was not kept in private either, with the papers reporting on each new development. Just a quick perusal of the available sources shows that at least information on the 1906 filing for receivership by Albert Theriot and Lorenzo Crist, the spurned nephew, was available from coast to coast. From Newport News, Virginia, the headline read “Want Receiver for Delmonico’s...Executor and Brother of Surviving Partners Dissatisfied with Management.”<sup>55</sup> In Los Angeles, the paper picked up the story from the Associated Press, which headlined their first page “Wants Receiver for Delmonico Restaurant.”<sup>56</sup> In the *Willmar Tribune*, based out of Minnesota, Delmonico’s application for receivership made their “Summary of a Week’s Events” article, which claimed to tell of the most important domestic events.<sup>57</sup> These mentions speak volumes about Delmonico’s national fame and the public’s interest in the goings-on there. According to reports, Delmonico’s was involuntarily placed into receivership over the small sum of \$799.15.<sup>58</sup> Disregarding the business side, this court battle once again tarnished Delmonico’s image. It brought into question whether, if the restaurant wasn’t able to pay its bills, they were still serving the most exquisite food and wine and employing the best service. The pettiness of the conflict, played out over the pages of newspaper after newspaper and year after year, was strikingly at odds with the image of propriety and privacy that Delmonico’s had worked so hard to maintain.

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<sup>54</sup> “Rosa Delmonico Dead,” *New York Sun*, March 26, 1904, 3.

<sup>55</sup> “Want Receiver for Delmonico’s,” *Newport News (VA) Daily Press*, November 18, 1906, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Associated Press, “Wants Receiver for Delmonico Restaurant,” *Los Angeles Herald*, November 15, 1906, 1.

<sup>57</sup> “Summary of a Week’s Events,” *Willmar (MN) Tribune*, November 21, 1906, 2.

<sup>58</sup> “Delmonico’s Now in Hands of Receiver,” *Washington Herald*, October 5, 1918, 1.

Finally, after the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919, the enforcement law stemming from the passage of Prohibition, a server at Delmonico's was caught by a dry agent selling liquor. During an afternoon tea dansant, John Bossons served Prohibition agents liquor from "a secret compartment in which, under several crumpled linen napkins, [there was] a bottle of gin and a bottle of Scotch whisky."<sup>59</sup> In return, he was receiving an extra cover of a few dollars, which was most likely the way the server made up for losing out on bigger tips from meals including wine and spirits.

This last situation shows not only a break with propriety, but also with legality. In addition, it illustrated management that wasn't deeply involved in the best interests of Delmonico's. When questioned about the alcohol, the floor manager merely said, "he did not know whose it was or whence it came."<sup>60</sup> The findings from the 1905 accountant's report, which was ordered by Albert Theriot over Josephine's protests, seem to support this notion, by saying "both restaurants seem to be run entirely by employees without any responsible head, the consequences being a lack of system and check, and opportunities for waste, extravagance, and theft are apparent on all sides."<sup>61</sup> The accountants' report speaks volumes about the actual state of the restaurant. With no responsible leader, there was no way of knowing whether the usual Delmonican quality was even being maintained.

Besides Delmonico's, the aspect that links all of these stories is the customer's expectations. Customers had knowledge of many places of disrepute, but if they went to a saloon or rathskeller, they didn't expect propriety or a meal to dazzle the senses. Even in a cabaret, which was a step above the saloon, the expectation was of a flirtatious evening filled with cocktails, dancing, and women. None of these fit with expectation of unimpeachable gentility at Delmonico's. These three examples suggest just the opposite and a newspaper account seems to

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<sup>59</sup> "Dry Agents Seize 2 at Delmonico's," *New York Times*, April 5, 1921, 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 294-95.

confirm that the clientele had changed as early as 1894 with the influx of “the ‘sporting’ element.”<sup>62</sup> Delmonico’s was trying to ensure the food, the service, and the feeling were the same, but these instances signaled that Delmonico’s was breaking with its long established and value-creating image. Debts were being collected in somewhere as public as a courthouse, the owners were quarreling in the public spotlight over how to run the restaurant, and there seemed to be no head that could control the employees to follow the law, much less live up to the expectations that customers had come to demand from the restaurant. This spelled the end of an era, and eventually, in conjunction with other events such as changing eating habits during World War I, the end of the restaurant.

### ***World War I Conservation Efforts***

During World War I, conservation efforts effectively changed American’s restaurant habits, and the restaurant experience. This change was so large that even Delmonico’s found it difficult to survive. In the past, Delmonico’s had lived through hard times in New York City’s history, including the Great Fire of 1835 and the Panic of 1873. These times had certainly been trying, but Delmonico’s somehow found a way to survive. Part of it was certainly its clientele, who were rich enough to be somewhat sheltered from these catastrophes. For example, during the inflation of 1882, which “sent food prices skyrocketing,” Charles Delmonico raised prices across the board, yet he was still able to make “between \$200,000 and \$300,000 a year net.”<sup>63</sup> The other part of their strategy for survival was a lax credit policy, which allowed many men the ability to eat now and pay later, when times improved. However, World War I presented a different

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<sup>62</sup> “Delmonico’s Closed Forever,” *Salt Lake Herald*, April 30, 1899, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico’s*, 201-202.

challenge for Delmonico's, and eventually proved the old adage "good times or bad, however the business pendulum swung, Delmonico's came out the winner," wrong.<sup>64</sup>

According to multiple accounts from 1918, the psychological effects of the war on normal patrons caused their dining habits to change. A sub-headline in the *New York Times* in 1918 announced "Famous Fifth Av. Restaurant...Hard Hit by War Conditions."<sup>65</sup> The article later went on to say that "business fell off with strange suddenness, and where a crowd had formerly waited for tables in the dinner hour there was not an evening when there were not vacant tables."<sup>66</sup> The *New York Tribune* supports this notion, saying "the war is responsible through high costs of materials and a suddenly acquired disposition on the part of the public to retrench and treat dining as a luxury of peace times."<sup>67</sup>

It is hard to blame this attitude, considering the measures enacted at the time. In 1918, there were sometimes "fuel holidays," where it was illegal for certain types of businesses, basically those deemed non-essential, to use energy of any kind for heat or for light. Consequently, an article in the *New York Times*, details how on January 22, 1918 Broadway was dark. They also noted that "proof that hotels, restaurants, and stores along Broadway depend largely upon theatregoers for their patronage was contained in the fact that business...was practically at a standstill last night."<sup>68</sup> Although Delmonico's was not along Broadway, it did serve a considerable crowd either before or after the show, and these fuel holidays had a considerable effect on their business.

It was also hard to blame these attitudes considering the citizen groups that emerged. For example, The American Protective League, which was under the direction of the United States

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<sup>64</sup> Thomas, *Delmonico's*, 202.

<sup>65</sup> "Receiver Named," *New York Times*, October 5, 1918, 17.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> "Delmonico's, World Famous Restaurant, Is in Hands of a Receiver," *New York Tribune*, October 5, 1918, 14.

<sup>68</sup> "Theatres Closed, Broadway Dark," *New York Times*, January 23, 1918, 3.

Department of Justice, would investigate individuals and businesses to see if they were following the conservation initiatives of the Food Administration. A letter from August 1918 illustrates how these could affect restaurants. The letter, written by Thomas V. Reeves to the U.S. Food Administration in San Francisco talks about an “Austrian restaurant called ‘The Java’...[that] refused to follow the instructions of the Food Administration in removing the sugar bowls from the tables.”<sup>69</sup> Considering the bias towards reporting German or Austrian people and establishments does not diminish the fact that conservation measures were not only affecting the attitudes toward restaurant dining but also the way people ate at restaurants. With something as simple as sugar being restricted, it is hard to imagine that restaurants were near their peak levels of opulence of only a few years previous.

These accounts support the notion that attitudes changed during the war from ostentation to conservation. In these instances, it was either societally or legally forced, but as noted in the 1918 Delmonico’s receiver announcements, it was probably more likely that it was a wholesale attitude change. This attitude changed to the detriment of the business of all high-end restaurants, and eating at one could be seen as not supporting the troops abroad.

## **Conclusion**

Although Prohibition is commonly cited as the reason for the decline of Delmonico’s and restaurants like it, the factors we’ve just examined tell us that the story is much more complicated. Prohibition played an undeniable role in Delmonico’s demise, but changes were already in effect twenty years before the Volstead Act was even on the books. What is most interesting is that Delmonico’s was essentially defunct a few months before Prohibition was ratified. That means that something other than Prohibition must have been contributing to the extreme strain on their business model. While some of the accounts we have examined are

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<sup>69</sup> Reeves to U.S. Food Administration, letter, August 8, 1918.

specific to the tragic story of Delmonico's later years, like lackluster leadership, sibling infighting, and a loss of propriety, many are much more general and applicable to the larger study of the restaurant industry.

The emergence of the cabaret and the lobster palaces signaled a new form of eating that went beyond nutrition or social statement to entertainment. Accordingly, we see showier restaurants born, like the Waldorf-Astoria with its Peacock Alley, but also restaurants that go beyond polite service and good food to dancing and drinking and everything in between. The rise of these establishments inherently spelled the end of Delmonico's (and restaurants like it) larger social importance. It would have been difficult for Delmonico's to be successful no matter how it changed or adapted. Adopting the cabaret style would mean abandoning the ideas and clientele that had made it successful in the past. Staying the same was equally disastrous. Its conservatism was no longer the dominant idea of society and it could no longer serve as a control method for old wealth over new money.

World War I was also an important change, but it was one that restaurants had no control over. The attitudes of conservation had quickened the pace of the end of extravagance in the public sphere, especially the restaurant. It was no longer possible to justify an enormous, gourmet meal with troops in the trenches across the Atlantic. These conservation movements were used to bolster the argument for Prohibition. Therefore, a type of gourmet food prohibition affected restaurants before the final blow of Prohibition finished them off for good.

Finally, some of the other larger lessons come in the form of the decline of the availability of wild game and the business environment of New York City. The decline of wild game brings to mind the question: how can a business adapt to a monumental change in their ability to produce their specialties? Delmonico's, with its reliance on the power of the canvasback duck and the terrapin, gives us a prime example of what happens when businesses do not adapt. Just like today, the business environment of New York City is extremely volatile. This

environment presents both opportunities and threats, and only an effective entrepreneur is able to identify which changes are which and develop a strategy to combat them. Because Delmonico's no longer had an effective leader, they were put at the mercy of the market, and their business model was on the losing end. What is perhaps strangest about Delmonico's decline is that even though they had disappeared in 1923, their name was still widely used, on a variety of businesses, as a symbol of quality. This is an interesting study into both the ability of brand name's to take on a life and meaning of their own and their ability to outlive their creators.



## Conclusion

Telling the story of a restaurant necessarily means telling the story of the culture that created it. The far-ranging history of Delmonico's spans both the nineteenth and twentieth century and illustrates the formation of a unique American experience. For example, the nineteenth century was typified by restraint for the individual in many ways. But in the restaurant, even with the rituals of the table, one could express his or her desires and make a statement about self through food. As Heather Lee points out about late Victorian men, "the spirit of competition carried into their private lives...they appraised masculinity by the ability to outrace, outsmart, and outdo the opponent."<sup>1</sup> In some sense, Delmonico's was a forum for this competition between wealthy Victorian men. It was not just eating but buying an experience, defining status, and asserting dominance. This is a unique aspect of the fluid class system of America, because the wealthy only have their assets to rely on for status. In this respect, we can understand how Delmonico's was created by the high society of New York. In the same way, Delmonico's gave form to the high society of the city. In the twentieth century, Victorian morals crumble and conspicuous dining crumbles with it. Because people were free to express themselves in less restrictive outlets, ones that had no need to conform to the traditions of the table, a place like Delmonico's became socially useless. Waning social influence was one reason for the financial disaster that fell upon Delmonico's in the early 1900s.

Unfortunately, the table at Delmonico's did not have a place for everyone. For many it was merely a dream. It was an inherently exclusive, upper-middle class, white establishment. Delmonico's was not for African-Americans, it was not for women (until very late in its career), and it certainly was not for the working-class. To be fair, the historical record does not suggest

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Lee, "Selfish Consumers: Delmonico's Restaurant and Learning to Satisfy Personal Desire," *Food for Thought: Essays on Eating and Culture*, ed. Lawrence C. Rubin (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2008), 181.

that this was due to the conscious decisions of the family, but linked to the business strategy they pursued. For example, in the summer of 1895, New York Governor Levi P. Morton passed a law prohibiting discrimination in hotels, restaurants, theaters, and barbershops. To test the law, three African-Americans went to various hotels and restaurants to see if they would be served or refused service. At Delmonico's, "the men got what they ordered, well-cooked and well served," which was not the case at other places, like Shanley's and O'Neill's.<sup>2</sup> As the Delmonico's Restaurant website points out, the old Delmonico's was "the first restaurant to allow women to congregate as a group."<sup>3</sup> It seems that the Delmonico family was actually rather welcoming for the times. An expensive restaurant with a daunting French menu, understandably, would not be within financial reach of the working class or immigrants. Nothing suggests the John and Peter, or their successors, set those prices to exclude. Rather, they set them as the fair price for their services. While Delmonico's may have been pervasive in the American psyche, it was only a reality to the small number of people who could afford it.

This thesis also suggests that the restaurant model should be considered as a part of the fashion industry. The fashion industry is typified not by technological advances or process innovations, but by design changes. One example would be the automobile industry of the 1950s, which focused intensely on style to the exclusion of engineering.<sup>4</sup> The focus of the restaurant is not to improve food or how to eat, but differentiate from the competition on the basis of style. Today, restaurants package food in many different ways, like ethnic, fusion, or natural. However, this type of differentiation is not much more than skin deep. Chicken might be presented in a different way and a different environment, but it is still chicken. Similarly, the only difference between model years in the 1950s was the height of the tailfin or what chrome was attached to the

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<sup>2</sup> "Must Feed Negroes: Delmonico's Tinsel No Longer Barred to Blacks," *Wichita (KS) Daily Eagle*, June 21, 1895, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Delmonico's Restaurant, "About: Delmonico's Firsts," Delmonico's Restaurant Group, <http://www.delmonicosrestaurantgroup.com/restaurant/about-firsts.html> (accessed April 2, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hines, *Populuxe* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 64.

outside. New restaurants do not typically reinvent the model, but instead prey on the fashion of the times.

However, the variety of choices in the American restaurant industry is still remarkable and should be celebrated, not disparaged. Almost every ethnicity is represented in a plethora of formats and locations. More than the sheer amount of variety is our acceptance and enjoyment of it. Delmonico's story could be considered worthy of study solely because they were able to sell French food to Americans. Central to any culture is its food. From childhood, food forms some of the strongest memories and these memories govern food choices even in adulthood. Delmonico's ability to overcome these ingrained tastes, especially those of the plain Dutch and English families, is an amazing accomplishment. Restaurants continue that trend today while acting as cultural ambassadors. Eating the food of another people is a profound sign of toleration and acceptance of which Delmonico's was the vanguard.

While the popularity of French classical cuisine has waned, Delmonico's persists today in the principles that guide the restaurant industry. It is hard to imagine a restaurant that is not influenced by the tenants of choice, convenience, or privacy. Fine dining certainly takes these lessons to heart and strives to find inventive ways to exploit these tenants for the enjoyment of their patrons. But these lessons pervade down the chain, even to modern-day equivalents of the chophouse, saloon, or café. The classic diner rivals Delmonico's original menu with the amount of dishes offered. Fast-food restaurants emphasize convenience, while the drive-in emphasized convenience and the ultimate form of American privacy, the confines of the car.

The modern restaurant is still a distinct form of business. In some sense, all businesses are based upon relationships between people, but in the restaurant dependence on relationships is even more pronounced. Eating is a very personal experience, not just because of personal tastes and preferences, but because of the high level of trust needed. One must trust a restaurant to safely prepare one's food. Because it is a highly unpleasant situation to eat food prepared by

someone who you do not trust, restaurants cannot afford to lose their patrons' trust. In this respect, the restaurant industry is quite odd. Delmonico's success is largely based on the personal relationships that Lorenzo Delmonico was able to form. People trusted Delmonico's to not only feed them, but to feed them well. More than anything, this trust cemented Delmonico's status and popularity. Strong feelings of trust kept Delmonico's alive through the Great Fire of 1835, the Civil War, and the various economic panics in the 1870s and 1890s. Delmonico's never competed on price or content but on the strength of the relationships they built.

Today, the Delmonico name continues to be hung above "The Citadel" in the heart of downtown Manhattan. While it is not owned by the family of Swiss immigrants that originally lent their name to the restaurant, it strives to maintain the same food and service as the original. They claim to "continue to serve a prime cut of beef, prepared to the original specifications...truly the only authentic Delmonico Steak served in America" and that their 56 Beaver Street location "has been renovated to assume the opulence of its early years."<sup>5</sup> It seems that Delmonico's lives on, at least for the moment.

This is perhaps a telling answer to the question of what Delmonico's can tell us about the dining out experience today. Even today, Delmonico's is a compelling story and is still a viable model. The existence of Delmonico's Restaurant was brought about by a group of sophisticated businessmen who were inspired enough by the original Delmonico story that they wanted to recreate it. The model that two brothers laid out in the 1830s is still a blueprint for fine dining today. Even if tastes have changed, the Delmonico Steak, Delmonico Potatoes, Chicken A La

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<sup>5</sup> Delmonico's Restaurant, "About: Delmonico's History," Delmonico's Restaurant Group, <http://www.delmonicosrestaurantgroup.com/restaurant/about-history.html> (accessed April 2, 2014).

Keene, Lobster Newburg, and Baked Alaska (all original creations of Charles Ranhofer) are still on the menu.<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, from a diner's perspective, the Delmonico vision is still enjoyable.

Even if it is not at the level of the old Delmonico's, and even if it is playing off the Delmonico's story as a cheap a theme, it does not matter. Delmonico's is here to stay, not because of dishes created by Charles Ranhofer, or stories of Gilded Age opulence, or because a few restaurateurs decided to resurrect the name. Delmonico's is here to stay because a conversation about American restaurants without the name Delmonico's is one that is sorely lacking. Delmonico's is here to stay because each meal served at an American restaurant is a re-affirmation of the ideas of two Swiss brothers trying to realize the American dream. The next time you are out to eat, you will remember the story of Delmonico's. Because that meal, even at the lowliest dive, has a little of the Delmonican dream in it.

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<sup>6</sup> Delmonico's Restaurant, "Menus: Lunch/Dinner Menu," Delmonico's Restaurant Group, <http://www.delmonicosrestaurantgroup.com/restaurant/menus-lunch-dinner.html> (accessed April 2, 2014).

Delmonico's Restaurant, "Menus: Dessert Menu," Delmonico's Restaurant Group, <http://www.delmonicosrestaurantgroup.com/restaurant/menus-dessert.html> (accessed April 2, 2014).

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**2<sup>nd</sup> Place Team – 2011 PwC xACT Case Competition, Penn State**

**Top Attorney – 2011 Tufts University Mock Trial Invitational**

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First Place – Washington, DC ORCs

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First Place – Ohio Northern University Invitational

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Fifth Place – University of Virginia Invitational

Third Place – Yale University Invitational

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### Association Memberships and Activities

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### Experience

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**Winget, Spadafora, and Schwartzberg, LLP – *Legal Intern***

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