

STRUCTURED MEALS : DIPLOMATIC ENTERTAINING

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The importance of the formal structure of certain meals is recognised by nutritional anthropologists (Douglas and Nicod 1974). Do modern diplomatic meals conform to the popular image of particular formality and conspicuous consumption or are they changing in response to modern nutritional concepts?

A study was made of evening dinner parties held at home with spouses present, the most typical and traditional form of diplomatic entertainment. Participant observation was used to record the characteristics of meals offered by heads of missions and senior British diplomats. The latter, and particularly their wives, were interviewed using an open-ended questionnaire. (Over 50 meals and 20 interviews were recorded).

The structure of meals and even the main foods used varied little. Typically there were four courses - one or two starters (two-thirds involved smoked salmon or shell fish); a hot, main course of meat (pieces of beef were served on a majority of occasions) with small amounts of potatoes, representing the basic staple, and an average of three types of vegetables chosen for their contrasting shape, texture and colour; a cold dessert based on raw, cooked or pureed fruit usually accompanied by cake, confectionery and/or cream. If there was only one starter, a cheese course or at least two puddings would be served.

Asked to assess the importance of several possible attributes of the meal, wives chose 1) the taste of food and drink, then 2) elegance of presentation followed by 3) nutritional quality. Less weight was given to 4) the 'Britishness' of the meals and 5) evidence of care and effort. Little or no importance was attached to 6) conspicuous costliness or 7) lavish quantities. Husbands agreed, except that they placed 'Britishness' above nutritional considerations.

Almost all wives considered that formal diplomatic dinners were nutritionally inferior to comparable family meals without guests. Two-thirds considered that they made, albeit modest, attempts to modify traditionally diplomatic practices in accordance with nutrition principles; most of the others felt guilty that they did not. The main criticism of diplomatic dinners was their fattening quality - notably their 'richness' over-abundance and high fat content. Wives' main strategies were to 1) alter recipes, 2) surreptitiously reduce quantities overall or 3) reduce the flexible fourth course to an optional extra or to token proportions.

The stated purpose of diplomatic entertainment was remarkably uniform - to establish and strengthen contacts with people with whom the husband had working relations. Subsidiary aims were to introduce visitors to interesting Australians and to get to know Australia and its people better.

Diplomatic meals are bound by a tight structure with little variation in the order of courses or types of food served. This may be because both the purpose of entertainment, namely to improve contacts, and the fact that guests often come from different cultures favour the use of a conventional format and militate against innovation which might be 'risky' in the context of developing social relationships. Thus, changes to achieve nutritional improvements must and, indeed, do take place within the framework of the formal structure, which is unlikely to adapt quickly. This case study of diplomatic dining may have relevance for examining change in the broader field of business and political entertainment.

DOUGLAS, M. and NICOD, M. (1974). *New Society* 30:744.

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