

Western Dishes

"It is a national dish, and like all national dishes unfashionable"--- Fanny Calderón de la Barca, "Life in Mexico".

With the advice and consent of Priscilla Nielson, an Ohioan by birth and a New Mexican by marriage, I was going to leave this section blank. Priscilla is a great cook and knows her beans. But I do not want to give offense to thirty percent of the land-mass of the United States, so I had better say something.

Of course there are Mexican dishes. The best known: tacos, enchiladas, burritos, etc. have achieved fast food status. I am going to rule out Mexican dishes. Mexican is Mexican.

Then there is chili con carne and that is principally a Texas dish which rules that out. Perhaps it might qualify on a technicality.

Let's face it: there is only one Western dish of any authenticity and that is steak. Steak is the name of the game, man*, this is Cattle Country. The steaks out here are plentiful, of excellent quality and expensive. I don't eat them.

*Podner, in an older terminology.

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To me, a dish is something that requires hours stirring the ladle over a hot stove. Cooking is the application of wit and herbs to meat, fish, and vegetables. Broiled steak doesn't qualify. I grant that broiled steak is food and probably will sustain life, a characteristic that it shares with crow or magpie, but throwing a hunk of meat under a grill and pulling it out the moment the surface exhibits a slight tendency to darken, doesn't constitute cooking in my book.

Your typical meal in a good western restaurant consists, then, of a cocktail drunk while you are waiting for a table, followed by a visit to the salad bar, followed by steak and a potato baked in aluminum foil style. There will be so much steak on your plate that you will politely request a doggie bag and take half of it home. You will probably forego dessert pretending that you are on a diet. No great loss. Western desserts are not memorable.

Now that I happened to have mentioned the salad bar, allow me to rant and rave a bit. The salad bar-- unheard of a generation ago-- has become epidemic throughout the land. I am all for sensible eating, but it seems to me that the salad bar puts one in

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the ridiculous position of a Peter Rabbit having a Lucullan orgy amongst the lettuces of Mr. McGregor's Garden. Besides, as one's digestive tract becomes older, it cannot handle the salad bar. Salad bar ought therefore to be ruled unconstitutional under the 14th Amendment on the grounds of discrimination.

To return. I don't really know what goes on in the hearth of hearths of The West. In the houses that have been opened to me, I have had some very good meals. Mexican(Yucatanian) , French, Russian, Hungarian, Chinese, and just plain American dishes have all appeared. This is a palette of tastes that has been learned recently. Many Westerners told me that they grew up with salt and pepper only and that in their youth nutmeg was considered risqué.

But my subject is not what Westerners now cook. Chuck wagon cooking died without issue. There is only one Western dish: steak.