

12: EAT LIKE A LIVING GOD

Making it a night to remember with a memorable meal has always been on the menu, from the ancient Egyptians to Georgian excess. So indulge yourself, says Jane Levi

HEAVENLY FEASTS IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Heaven just wouldn't be heaven without a magnificent meal, and it's obvious that the Pharaohs weren't prepared to take any chances. The tombs in the Valley of the Kings are filled with paintings of people growing, cooking and serving food; models and carvings of important foodstuffs; and all the pots and dishes (and servants) needed to prepare and serve the banquet. Joints of meat - duck, ox, pigeon, antelope - are carved into wall friezes and formed out of plaster. They sit alongside life-sized earthenware models of fruits and vegetables.

Real breads, some of them dainty dinner rolls in decorative geometrical shapes, have been unearthed and analysed. After millennia underground they're as desiccated as the mummies they were meant to feed, but they are still recognisable as bread. Some Pharaohs even took three-dimensional models of fully staffed breweries, butcher's and bakeries with them, ensuring they not only had the knives and ovens they'd need, but also the skilled cooks to operate them. That's what you call a takeaway.

LIVING FOOD - MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE SURPRISES

Spectacle was an essential element in medieval celebrations, and foodstuffs designed to look like something else were a popular way of providing a surprise: almond milk puddings served in real egg shells; meat loaves in the form of giant pea pods; individual peas made of almond or trout painted green.

So far, so harmless, but *The Vivandier*, compiled in the 15th century, proposed a few novel centrepieces, designed to make guests believe their food was still alive. By stuffing the



▲ Season Of The Witch by Tim Bret-Day, from Agent Provocateur's *Tableaux Vivants* campaign, 2008

neck of a roast chicken, gosling or piglet with quicksilver (mercury) and ground sulphur, and warming it at the crucial moment, you could make it imitate the cry of a living animal at table. For a more extreme effect, *The Vivandier* suggests plucking a live chicken, painting it with egg yolk, saffron and roasting juices, and then sending the unfortunate creature to sleep by tucking its head under its wing and rotating it in your hands (apparently this trick really works with a live, feathered chicken). Once snoozing, the bird can be placed in a dish of roasted meats and sent up to the table. On being tackled with a carving knife it will wake up, running down the table upsetting jugs and glasses to the delight and amusement of diners.

PARTY PIES - 17TH-CENTURY BRITAIN

For sheer inventiveness, some of the 17th century's pie creations provide more humane inspiration for the imaginative 21st-century host.

In February 1662, Samuel Pepys enjoyed a culinary "frolique" at a wedding anniversary party: a series of three suggestively arranged pies, one for each year of marriage. In this period, the pie crust wasn't eaten. Rather, it was a decorative container, providing an outlet for the artistry of the cook and protecting the contents, which were eaten with a spoon. At this particular party, when the entire filling in the pie had been devoured, one of the ladies filled the empty crust with "at least" a pint and a half of white wine and quaffed the lot.

Robert May's "extraordinary" pie, the detailed instructions for which take up three pages in his 1660 work *The Accomplish'd Cook*, is even more spectacular. An elaborate party piece, it comprises 17 distinct pies baked on one base, making a single pie that is at once a decoration and a series of dishes. The finished article is a composition of individual pies: intriguingly seasoned meats and nuts; oysters with ginger and garlic; prawns and cockles with orange and pickled mushrooms; artichoke hearts with nutmeg; and an edge of

many smaller spiced egg pies with dates. For a wedding feast, May recommends making a hollow casing for the central pie and filling it with "live birds, or a snake, which will seem strange to the beholders, which cut up the pie at the table". Indeed.

CLASSICAL BEAUTIES - 18TH-CENTURY TABLE DECORATIONS

Imagine a huge dining table in a grand salon laid with the finest glass, silver, linen and porcelain. Then look at the centrepiece. The table is decorated with perfect models of classical statues, temples and coloured parterres - all made of sugar. These decorative models were the apogees of the banqueting or dessert course for the smartest baroque dinners, and the confectioner was king. Delicate arrangements of rare flowers, painstakingly crafted from sugar paste and eggshells, presented in Sevres porcelain vases; dainty cups, plates and glasses as edible as the sweetmeats presented in them; tiny baskets of miniature fruits and vegetables; all laid out on reflective silver or mirrored glass for maximum sparkle. Whether you wanted to impress your guests with a model of the new wing of your house, flatter a royal guest with their perfectly painted coat of arms, or take everyone's breath away with a reconstruction of Circe's island, a top confectioner could skillfully construct these models with nothing more than sugar artistry. With the ultimate in dining ephemera, a host could demonstrate his wealth and his good taste through the realisation of the most elaborate scenes in a medium more delicate than the finest porcelain. Add music, verse and candlelight, and try to make sure you are as well dressed as the dining room.

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KNOW WHAT NOT TO DO

In the opinion of the professional party planners, here are three of the worst ideas for a theme party. But never fear - the true professionals don't believe any idea is so bad it is past saving..

1

DRUG ADDICTS AND WHORES

Several years ago John Roxburgh was asked by a City trader to organise a party on the theme of drug addicts and whore - this was obviously in the pre-Lehman Brother no-shame days. Not convinced this was tasteful even by City trader terms, Roxburgh rebranded it as "Rehab" with waiters dressed as nurses, serving vodka from syringes.

2

OFFAL

Back in 1995, Stevie Congdon was taken on to plan a "Hell" themed party for 30 close friends. "The client wanted to shock more than terrify so she asked for a suspended display of offal such as lungs, hearts, kidneys and pigs' heads running down the centre of the table. I have to admit that I thought it was an interesting idea - after all, we were all getting used to Damien Hirst's art at the time so what were a few more dead animals?"

3

GARDEN OF EDEN

One of Charlotte Hammerbeck's clients had her heart set on a Garden of Eden party. "It sounded very creative but after the first meeting we realised it just wouldn't work for two good reasons. One, you really want 150 naked people turning up, and two, once you've covered the apple and the snake what's left? Luckily we managed to persuade her to run with the theme and change it to 'Temptation'.