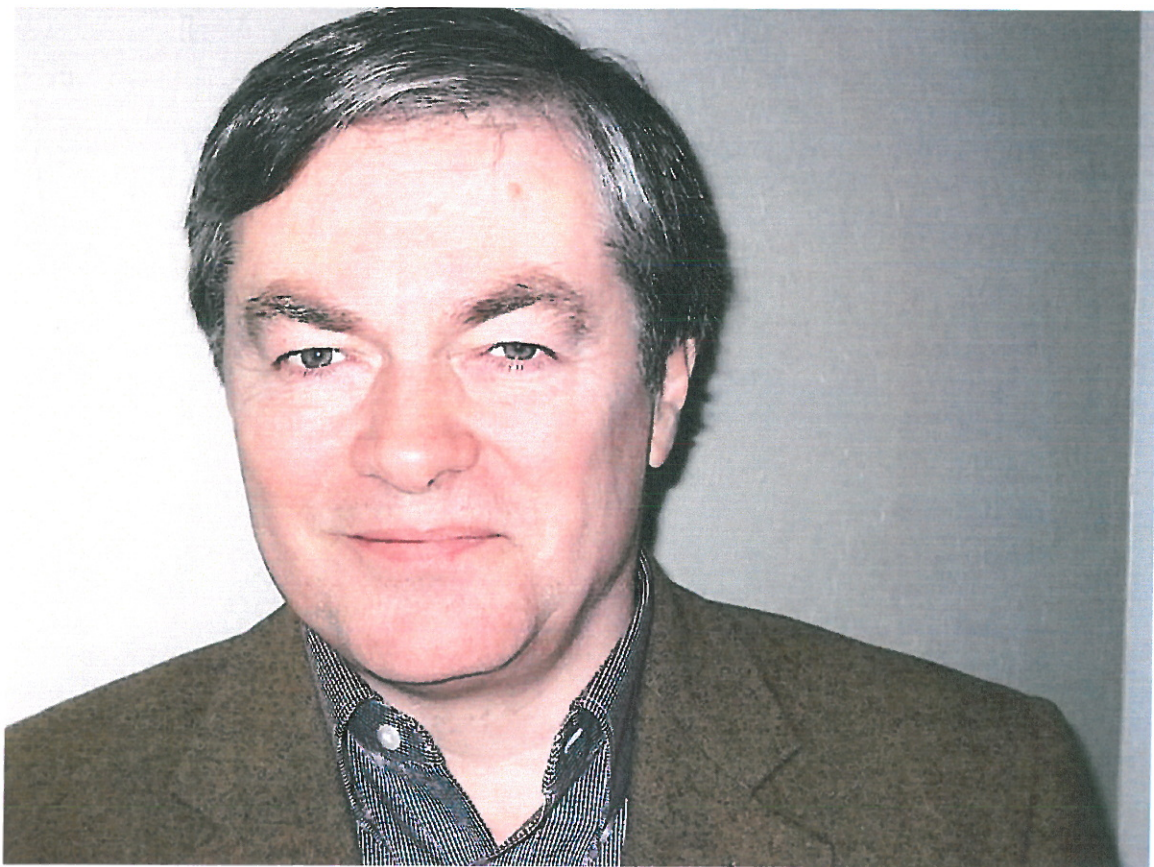


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Q&A

A culinary historian's surprising account of Boston restaurants through time



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James C. O'Connell

By Michael Floreak | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 27,
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The myth goes that before Julia Child inspired a new generation of chefs, restaurant dining in Boston was rarely more exciting than broiled scrod and a cup of chowder. But urban historian James C. O'Connell teases out a much richer picture of Boston's restaurant history over the past two-plus centuries in his new book, "Dining Out in Boston: A Culinary History."

O'Connell, who lives in Newton and plans historic sites for the National Park Service, traces the evolution of restaurants in Boston from the 1790s to the present. Illustrated with historic menus from elegant hotel dining rooms, oyster bars, and Chinese and Italian spots, O'Connell's book tells a complex story that goes beyond pot roast and baked beans. It includes familiar names such as the Union Oyster House, Durgin-Park, and Anthony's Pier 4, along with long-forgotten spots. As for the quality of pre-Julia dining, O'Connell says some was quite elaborate and surprisingly good. "At the finer dining hotels, you had food that was as good as any place in America. Maybe not quite like Delmonico's in New York, but not far off at the hotels," he says.

Q. What were the first places to eat in Boston?

A. In the earliest days, you had the inns and the taverns — in the 18th century up to the Revolution. The first place I've come across where you could go in and get a choice and order from a menu is Julien's Restorator from 1793, which is considered to be the first restaurant in America. It's based upon the Parisian-style restaurants of that era, which were light meals, soups, bouillons, pastries. Not heavy dinners. It was founded by this chef who had worked for the archbishop of Bordeaux.

But I discovered ^{Comments} there were three others in the 1790s, as well — people fleeing France, coming to Boston, and opening these Parisian-style restaurants.

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Q. For a long time, the best dining was found in hotels. Why's that?

A. Restaurants were kind of tethered to people's traveling and staying over. People didn't eat out the way we do today for entertainment, which is something that has evolved since the 1970s. At these major hotels like Tremont House, Revere House, Parker House, meals would've been served on the American Plan, the French style of service where they would've put out six or eight courses. You might have 40 different dishes you could choose from. Waiters would kind of hand them around. It was almost like going to a buffet except you were sitting down and waiters were offering you food from each dish. The Parker House in 1855 starts the a la carte menu, the European Plan, where you just pick and pay for what you're eating.

Q. What was dining out like for the less wealthy?

A. We have still kind of an example, although it's not the way it was in the 19th century, in the Union Oyster House. Before the Civil War, you had maybe 50 of these oyster bars. They probably didn't even have a menu, maybe something written on a chalkboard. You just see basically

clams and oysters, maybe scallops, crackers and milk, and pie. Then you'd have a drink, a shot of whiskey or something like that. That would be a cheap workingman's lunch.

Q. What was the high point in Boston's dining history?

A. Around 1900, you had this high-style food at places like Locke-Ober and the fine hotels — Young's and the Tremont House, the Parker House, the Thorndike, the Touraine, the Victoria, the Vendome. There were a lot of restaurants and it was a very celebratory thing. Dining and dancing becomes big around 1910. Women start finally getting taken out by their husbands and boyfriends. It's a time of great excitement and good food. And then Prohibition and other things completely change direction, not just in Boston but everywhere for about 50 years, making the food plainer, if you will. Industrialization makes the food more homogeneous.

Q. If you could eat at one restaurant from Boston's past, where would it be?

A. Young's Hotel. It always had a reputation for being one of the finest places. When the owners built the new, modern Parker House, they said we're going to close Young's, which dated back to the 1860s. But the food there, I was just so amazed.

Q. What made it so special?

A. They had all these special menus for the Harvard-Yale game and Thanksgiving, but at the same time they had an a la carte menu of the day where they had 27 oyster dishes, 14 clam dishes, 24 soups you could order, 38 salads, 27 preparations of sweetbreads, and 57 steak dishes.

How could they put out 57 different steak dishes? That's crazy. They also had pig's feet and crackers and milk. Other hotels had similar menus in 1910. The idea back then was to blow your mind with choice.

Interview was edited and condensed. Michael Floreak can be reached at michaelfloreak@gmail.com.

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