



Far left: Ruth Lowinsky. Left: Cooks Jane Longman and Rose Gray in Diana Cooper's dining room with some food prepared à la Lowinsky. Above: Tommy Lowinsky.

DAVID MONTGOMERY

## THE HOME COOKING OF MRS. LOWINSKY

This London hostess of the thirties was as famous for her bons mots as for her tomato ice

By James Fox

Not so long ago I inherited a small collection of cookbooks which describe an inspired and forgotten moment in English cooking—that of the 1920s and '30s—whose particular art now seems coolly superior to the somewhat straining obsessions of the Foodies. It was confined, on the whole, to a handful of smartish London hostesses and their worldly, and butlered, little gatherings. The food was always elegant in appearance—often linked with the décor, and advice on when to put the white Ming rabbits on the table, and so on—but it is simple and original and owes little to European influence; if anything it is closer to the best American home cooking. Arabella Boxer, who revived its memory in her book *A*

*Second Slice* (1966), described it to me in a letter as “sophisticated nursery food or nursery food for greedy adults.” The hours I have spent searching through this windfall are better not counted. Greed is partly to blame but also a Buñuel-like fascination with the comic rituals of serious eating and in this case the bossy, scolding tones of the hostesses in question and their exasperation with what *Vogue* reported as the universal complaint of 1929: “Trying experiences below the stairs.”

The recipes touch off a nostalgia too, not with the nursery—an abiding fantasy for many Englishmen, enshrined in the grandest restaurants like Wilton's, where nanny-waitresses in starched uniforms serve disguised

nursery food—but with the food itself. Its official end came with war rationing, which lasted until 1954, to be replaced by Elizabeth David's *Mediterranean Food*. But it survived in pockets until 1960: Nancy Astor had it at Cliveden and at Eaton Square, Nancy Lancaster at Haseley, Edwina d'Erlanger at Upper Grosvenor Street, all, significantly perhaps, Americans from the South who kept up the practice of butlered lunch parties. My sense of loss centers on the creamy purées of turnips or spinach—with fried bread triangles—and Mrs. Gibson's Egg Dish, named after Nancy Astor's sister, Irene, the “Gibson Girl.” Its finely chopped hard-boiled eggs with fried spring onions, cream, butter, and

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Mrs. Lowinsky prefaces Menu 28 of *More Lovely Food* as follows: "A dinner of talented people whose means of expression is unhappily not speech. . . Make the cocktails potent"

bread crumbs, layer on layer, put in the oven until "done and brown," were light enough, if you can imagine it, to blow away in the breeze.

The main books, all of them out of print, include *Food for the Greedy* (1922) by Nancy Shaw and *Lady Sysonby's Cookbook* (1935), decorated by Oliver Messel, with a foreword by Osbert Sitwell, and written, judging by its peculiar historical inaccuracies, after a goodish lunch. There is also *Caviare to Candy* by Mrs. Philip Martineau (1927), which sets the style for the genre with its chilly, hectoring remarks about the staff.

"What chance has the average cook unless her mistress will help her? She, good soul, has not the advantages of tasting the wonderful food in high class restaurants. How can one expect one's cook to

invent such a sauce as currant jelly beaten into horseradish cream to eat with a saddle of mutton? Or would it occur to her to put a sprig of rosemary into the basting of lamb? Does she realize that you can't make successful mousses (iced) without a suspicion of 'O be joyful' in the form of some liqueur? No! Then the only thing to do is to help her yourself to understand why an orange salad with wild duck is necessary."

"Iced," slipped in there, is the key word.

It was certainly a minor movement and an isolated one, but it was a radical departure from the old Edwardian monotony, from the *longueur* and the unimaginative richness which dominated the twenties (the pheasant cooked in Chablis which itself enclosed an ortolan stuffed with foie gras of Vita Sackville-

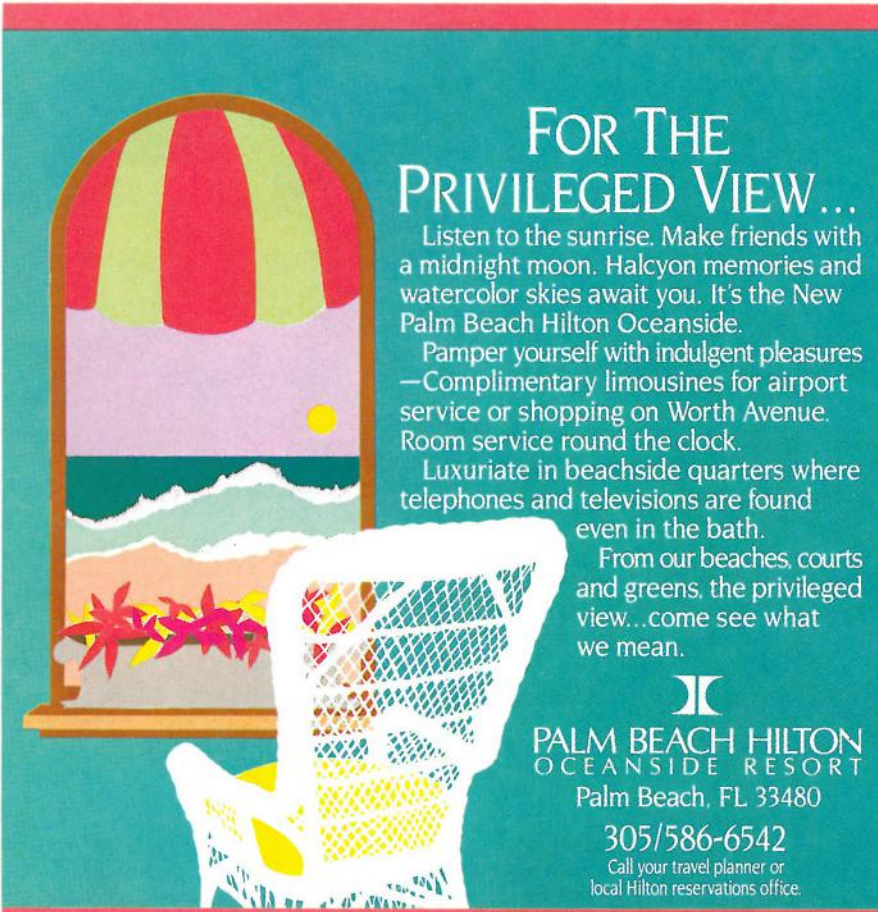
West's *The Edwardians*, for example).

It took a Frenchman, Marcel Boulestin, renegade from the world of Colette and Willy and passionate Anglophile (once seen drinking whiskey throughout his dinner at Fouquet's), to change things, with his regular columns, his books, and his legendary restaurant in Leicester Square. Hostesses sent their cooks to his lessons at Fortnum's, and by 1932 a few rich ladies had joined André L. Simon's Wine and Food Society.

It is the books of Ruth Lowinsky, however, which led me on a quest of discovery, particularly two elegant editions called *Lovely Food* (1931) and *More Lovely Food* (1935). Mrs. Lowinsky's own trumpet tones and rallying cries, all well meant, all in the cause of "good taste," are in her introduction to the menus and in her pleas for greater domestic order. She quite outdoes Mrs. Martineau. "The menus and recipes in this book are all *cuisine bourgeoise* of rather a high order," she writes in *Lovely Food*, somewhat inaccurately. "They should be well within the range of even a young cook, if they are read to her and carefully explained and she has any gift for cooking."

One gets a sense of Ruth Lowinsky's robustness from the imagined social situations with which she prefaces her menus. Menu 28 of *More Lovely Food* was "A dinner of talented people whose means of self expression is, unhappily, not speech. They do not possess that nameless thing called charm, an old lady once said to us of a mutual friend. Make the cocktails potent." At times she was a little risqué. One of the menus is headed: "Suppose your husband has gone to America on business, this might be the first of a series of dinners with a close friend."

She is full of advice and dire warnings ("Coffee is a pitfall to many"), and it is taken for granted that the food will be handed round by a butler, *not* a parlormaid: "Men wait more quickly and noiselessly than women. They have not discovered that maddening trick of hooking a foot round the door to close it when the hands are occupied." One



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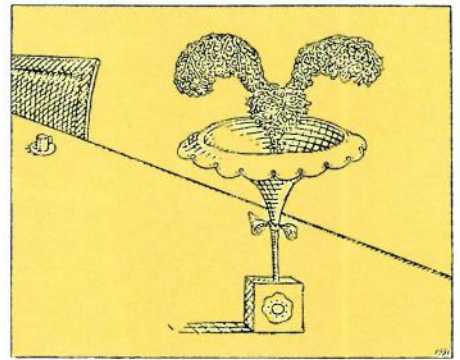
## AT THE TABLE

hears the murdered English playwright Joe Orton, author of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, laughing in his grave. He could not have improved on that line. Sometimes Mrs. Lowinsky was tempted to overreach herself. "One of the most important things for a housewife to remember," she writes, "is that hot things should be VERY hot and cold VERY cold. Profit by the classic example of a guest at Disraeli's table on arrival of the ice. 'Ah, something really hot at last.'" Disraeli and his table are unfairly maligned. He was the guest on that occasion and all the hot dishes had been served cold. When the champagne arrived, lukewarm, he was heard to say, "Finally, something warm."

Equally intriguing are the illustrations by her husband, Tommy Lowinsky, fantastical surrealistic ink drawings of table decorations with such titles as, "an accumulator jar holding water, goldfish and a miniature ruined temple."

It is odd that Mrs. Lowinsky occupies hardly a footnote in the letters and biographies of the period. She was not as grand a hostess as Emerald Cunard or Lady Colefax (both of them reported to have very good food), but she did have a distinguished and faithful coterie which included Rebecca West, who was her closest friend, the Sitwells (Edith was the godmother of her second daughter), and John Rothenstein. One of her books is dedicated jointly to Raymond Mortimer, the English critic and French scholar and Ethel Sands, the painter, whose mother, Mrs. Mahlon Sands, was a close friend of Henry James. Ethel was James's protégée and is probably the model for the young girl in *The Awkward Age*. She lived in Chelsea with her companion, Nan Hudson—where she introduced Lytton Strachey to George Moore and Gertrude Stein—and near Dieppe at the Château D'Auppegard at Offranville, with Sickert as her neighbor and Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell as frequent guests. The fresco they painted is still there in a garden pavilion.

Ruth Lowinsky had inherited from her father, Seymour Hirsch, a fortune made in South African minerals. The Lowinskys lived in a house in Kensington Square which had once belonged to Burne-Jones. A small woman who wore expensive hats and whose warmth of soul was often concealed



Tommy Lowinsky's whimsical 1931 drawing of a table decoration for tea from *Lovely Food*.

beneath what was known as "a tongue," Mrs. Lowinsky didn't by all accounts tolerate bores. "She would stare straight at you and say the most disarming things," said a contemporary. "She was like a Liliane de Rothschild," said another. "Rotund, amiable, bursting with energy and cultural patter." She seemed a little like Proust's Madame Verdurin, the bossy and dictatorial hostess out to conquer society, who took grand houses and was possessive of her circle of friends. Oddly enough, Ruth Lowinsky, according to another acquaintance, "couldn't stand Proust. She thought him a frightful snob and a bore"—the very words Madame Verdurin used to describe anyone outside her collection.

Even more surprising is the total eclipse of Tommy Lowinsky, a painter who was highly regarded during the thirties, especially among his fellow artists. He painted slowly, with infinite care and produced comparatively little—his models often sitting for a year or more. Lowinsky was equally renowned for his remarkable collector's eye. At a time when they were unfashionable and cheap he amassed the largest collection in Britain of early English watercolors—Samuel Palmer, Gainsborough, Fuseli, Romney, Constable, Blake. The collection—except for a Fuseli of Mrs. Siddons playing Lady Macbeth now in the Tate—was sold some years ago to the Mellon Center for British Art at Yale.

Tommy Lowinsky is described as dreamy and diffident, a fastidious and censorious man, social nevertheless, with "a high feminine voice, small brown moustache and melting eyes," who dressed formally, like Anthony Eden, and had a deep horror of the

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floppy-tie image of his friend Augustus John, refusing John to paint his daughters. He was penniless before his marriage, his father having gambled away his own mineral fortune. When Tommy turned out a painter and a grower of rhododendrons, his father bullied him mercilessly. That and the First World War nearly finished him—until Ruth saved him. "He was rather a feeble creature," said a contemporary. "Didn't drive or anything." Ruth made up for that. A friend remembers her as a dashing driver, who once shot through a level crossing within yards of an oncoming train. They were married in 1919. Bridge was Ruth Lowinsky's passion. So were all competitive household games, which she "played to the death." "The really enthusiastic housewife," she wrote in *Lovely Food*, "will find a hostess's menu book useful. . . she will also enter in her book what games are played—cards, paper-games, murders, etc." Her other passion was for ices, particularly tomato ice, which was her trademark.

I consulted Elizabeth David, who had once written about Ruth Lowinsky's recipe for iced gooseberry fool in an article called "Fools and Syllabubs." Back came a long and elegantly written reply:

"Proper refrigerators—as opposed to ice boxes—were still comparative novelties in the early 1930s and it was smart to serve things like iced horseradish sauce, iced curried chicken mousse, iced camembert cream, tomato ice and so on. Ruth Lowinsky's recipes were certainly of this school. Her book (*Lovely Food*) is a true period piece, which is to say that in its time it was bang up to date."

She wrote, elsewhere in the letter:

"I met Mrs. Lowinsky once, at dinner in the house of a mutual friend, Patrick Kinross, now alas dead. She was a small woman with white hair, and dressed all in black. I don't think we talked much about cooking or food. Maybe she was wary of me, or perhaps slightly disapproving, but I think it was quite a big dinner party so I don't remember any particular exchange of ideas about cookery or cookery books."

Elizabeth David believes that Mrs. Lowinsky may have borrowed from another book of the period, Paul Rebour's *Book of New French Cooking*—a writer's cookbook (translated) with a touch of Breton or Aragon. Rebour's



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imagined social situations include: "Hello, I'm bringing a Pal Home to Dinner"; "How to treat a Poetess"; "Don't forget you owe your Decoration to Him."

From 1920 until the war, the lights blazed at Kensington Square. The dining room was dark peacock blue, the curtains the same color, striped in yellow. Mrs. Lowinsky occasionally drank a thimbleful of Château d'Yquem—which, she said, "goes straight to my nose." She built a cocktail room extension to provide Tommy with a studio on the floor above. A guest remembers two elderly parlormaid running into the studio, as lunch was announced, to collect Tommy's brushes, to wash them before he returned. "Daddy never lifted a finger," said Clare Stanley-Clarke. "I don't think he ever poured a drink, in case it spoiled his hands for painting."

Ruth Lowinsky was to be seen at every opening and at every fashionable new play, always striding ahead of her husband. And in the summer they took the grandest English houses, including Stanway, one of the most beautiful in England, owned by Lord Wemyss. The country gave even greater scope for Mrs. Lowinsky's boundless vitality and guests remember the zest with which she organized bicycle polo, croquet tournaments, and cricket matches of mothers versus boys. When the war came they rented Garsington, Lady Ottoline Morrell's old home—the setting for Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow* and for part of Lawrence's *Women in Love*—from an Oxford don. In their absence Kensington Square was bombed. Kenneth Clark, Ethel Sands, Eddie Sackville-West, the Sitwells, all came to stay. Tommy Lowinsky spent the entire war painting one picture—a view through the bedroom window that Lytton Strachey had occupied in Bloomsbury days. "He could only paint when the light was perfect," said Clare Stanley-Clarke, "which it rarely was. So he practically never painted."

Until the war Mrs. Lowinsky didn't cook herself, and many of her recipes, as a result, don't work. She gives credit to her own cook, Mlle. Audebert, as one of the finest in the land. The mornings would be spent, as she lay in bed with her tray, in that ritual lovingly illustrated in *Vogue*, consulting Mlle. Audebert, deciphering the food of the rival hostesses and the good restaurants, and giving instructions.

When the war started Mlle. Audebert left her service taking the second housemaid and opened a restaurant in the East End, and Ruth Lowinsky was forced to the stove, with mixed results. Her daughters remember the early attempts as disaster. "She got out a great many saucepans," said Clare Stanley-Clarke. "The food was frightful at first, very sketchy." Ruth overcame the problem with characteristic chutzpah. She raised bees, Muscovy ducks, chickens, and a pig. Her two subsequent books, *What's Cooking* (1939) and *Food for Pleasure* (1950), are full of wise authority and experience. *Food for Pleasure* is her most useful book. It wraps up the best recipes of the prewar hostesses, and her own as well. The title is intended as a challenge and Mrs. Lowinsky gives, in her introduction, a timely pep talk. "In the kitchen, as everywhere," she booms, "enterprise has diminished, is diminishing and ought to be increased."

To help raise morale in those gloomy days Ruth Lowinsky attacked the Austrian cook who had left her in 1940, with the veiled suggestion that she was both a traitor and a black-

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marketeer. "During the war she had either cooked in Switzerland, apparently with all the meat, cream and eggs that the heart of cordon bleu could wish, or else lived in her native hamlet trying half heartedly to vary the taste of the polenta which was all she could afford." Returning after nine years she refused to adapt to British privations and often burst into "indignant tears." "Her lack of adaptability, her peasant obstinacy, reduced me to dismay," she wrote. "After three months we parted friends, but Oh! without regret."

It might astonish Mrs. Lowinsky to see how polenta has insinuated itself into high fashion through the tradesmen's entrance, as it were—a reversal of her maxim: "What is chic today is boarding house tomorrow."

Tommy Lowinsky died in 1948. Ruth went on entertaining after the war in her house in Brompton Square. She died, in her bath, of a brain hemorrhage in 1958 on the eve of a trip to India on which she was setting out alone.

In honor of Ruth Lowinsky, sharing the spirit of her dedication in *Lovely Food* ("For each other and our greedier friends"), I held two dinners in London, based on her recipes and cooked by two transcendently gifted cooks of my acquaintance, Rose Gray and Jane Longman. The Château Pétrus for the first meal was provided by Andrew Bruce, a dedicated and successful young wine merchant in London, whose first response to the idea of a Ruth Lowinsky memorial was, "I have a Cheval Blanc '34, but it's in Paris."

The menus were as follows:

Tomato Ice  
Sweetbreads in a Pot  
Braised Endives

Omelette Soufflé  
Fried Camembert in  
breadcrumbs

Wines: Champagne; Château  
Pétrus; Gewürztraminer

And then, a few days later:

Spinach Soup with Sorrel  
Herrings stuffed with anchovies  
à la Turque  
Steamed Fennel with Green Bacon

Bakewell Tart

Wines: Champagne (1976);  
Chablis (Lamothe '82), smoky  
and aromatic and astonishing  
to the guests.

The table was decorated with sugared almonds according to Mrs. Lowinsky's instruction: "Decorate the table with sugared almonds as they do in France. They lend a very festive air." Unfortunately these were eaten, in both cases before the dessert by our greedier friends. Mrs. Lowinsky's Bakewell Tart with its mixture of fruit jams and its Parisian pastry is considered, by these talented and curious cooks, her *pièce de résistance*. □



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