

Topics

Testing Tastes

The Pampered Palate

The White House has lost its pastry chef, the Waldorf-Astoria has lost its Iranian restaurant and France has lost its snail-eating champion. The first apparently succumbed to the difficulty of getting fresh, unpasteurized cream through the Secret Service. The second seems a casualty of the Iranian crisis. The third O.D.'d on his specialty, snails. All three show how the pampered palate can go wrong.

Anyone lucky enough to have sampled Albert Kumin's pastry knows that such fragile meringues and delicate tortes could not survive a committee. The question of who among temperamental chefs rules the kitchen has always been answered by letting the pastry chef run his own little operation. The moral, for any future applicants for the job: If you can't take ultra-pasteurized cream, stay out of the White House.

Shah Abbas, the Iranian restaurant at the Waldorf, was done in by the troubled times. But it is also a victim of the current certainty in the hospitality business that restaurants must have an extravagant theme, with décor and food to match. One of the greatest of all restaurateurs, Henri Soulé, believed that red velvet, crystal, soft lights, fresh flowers and im-

peccable cuisine were enough. That formula, unhappily, succumbed to the rush for novelty and theatricality. The moral: return to the classic, or at least the innocuous. The Waldorf now plans a luxuriously neutral restaurant.

Finally, there is excess. It is not necessary to eat six dozen snails in under six minutes, either to impress one's companions or to honor France. Worse, it would be impossible to enjoy them. Pleasure is still the point. Given our choice of what to O.D. on, we would take Mr. Kumin's chocolate velvet cake, with whipped cream.

The Ambience of Smoke

On its face, the Virginia Supreme Court's recent decision on smoking seems like common sense: since it is impossible to separate smoke from air in an open room, it is impractical to separate smokers from non-smokers in restaurants. Hence the court struck down enforcement of a local ordinance requiring no-smoking areas in restaurants. "The requirement . . . hardly limits the amount of smoke in the air," the court said. "If smoke exhaled in such an environment is toxic, its harmful effects are ambient."

But what narrow common sense that turns out to be. The harmful effects

are not limited to the ambience of smoke. There is indirect but potentially great harm in the ambience of smokers. Persuaded by repeated evidence of health damage, many Americans have been giving up smoking. There may now be more than 30 million ex-smokers, and many others undoubtedly wish to join them. But quitting is hard, and never harder than after meals, particularly if people all around start lighting up. The problem, in other words, is contagion.

The law shouldn't have to do handstands to help would-be stoppers stay on the wagon. But no handstands are being urged. On the contrary, a society intent on improving public health should be eager to take steps to support stoppers, especially when, as with no-smoking areas, it can do so without being intolerant of smokers.

The Virginia court seems also to have avoided the question of nuisance. Sure, smoke rises and mixes with room air. But the average is not necessarily the specific. Are the sensibilities of the Virginia justices so dulled that they cannot distinguish between breathing air in which smoke has been generally dispersed and breathing the effusions of a cigar smoker at the next table? Some people may not mind breathing either kind of air, but most people know the difference.