

Frugal Gourmets

By Annette Foglino

In this age of nouvelle richesse, even food is subject to abrupt changes of status. Take polenta, the cornmeal mush often served with beans and sausage floating in it. An Italian peasant food whose primary virtue has traditionally been that it would stick to farmers' ribs during winter, polenta recently made an appearance on the grand stage of American cuisine. Eager diners at Manhattan's Le Cirque 2000 eschewed the restaurant's famous paupiette of black sea bass in Barolo wine sauce for the chance to have a large portion of the yellow gruel dumped directly on their table, just as poor Italian families used to do.

"More and more lower-social-status foods are making their way up the social scale," says nutritional anthropologist Solomon H. Katz, Ph.D., of the University of Pennsylvania. "The same thing is happening with blue corn tortillas. It used to be the other way around—the lower classes wanted what the upper classes had. But the farther up on the social scale we get, the more secure we are in reaching down." For Le Cirque 2000 chef Marc Poidevin, it all makes sense: "They're often totally arbitrary, and never more so than right now in our celebrity culture. Look at Wolfgang Puck. He turned pizza into a high-end food by getting rich and famous people to eat it."

This is not the first time foods have followed the American dream from staple to delicacy. Lobster and salmon were once eaten only by indentured servants. At the turn of the century, caviar was so easy to get that it was given away in bars, like peanuts. Some theorists point to heightened health consciousness to explain the trend, but Betty Fussell, food historian and author of *I Hear America Cooking*, sees it as a perfect illustration of the irrational nature of class distinctions. "When the wealthy have tried everything else, they start expanding to the foods of the poor. They get bored and figure, 'How bad could it be?'"

For those used to expensive food, the experience is a form of gastronomic slumming. "You sit there holding on to this extremely ornate silver spoon," says one recent diner, "and the cooks come and dump gruel on your table. You taste it and then instantly wish you

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were at a red-and-white-checked table in Italy, with a big peasant family in the background. You almost want to eat with your hands.”

Forgotten amid the celebrations of those that reach the top, however, are those foods once considered A-list that have since fallen on hard times. Like parsley. Once a sign of gentility and used as a garnish, parsley has become so declasse that upscale eateries rarely place it on their dishes any more. “If you’re served a plate with parsley on it,” says Fussell, “you know you’re not at Le Cirque.”