

Eating Out

Those of us who are “children of the depression,” when we heard the expression “eating out,” assumed it meant taking a sandwich somewhere. We did not know from restaurants. We knew they existed, but they were for rich people.

There were only two places where I went with my mother to “eat out” as a pre-teen: the delicatessen on Longwood Avenue between Fox Street and Southern Blvd., where we ordered hot dogs; and the candy store on the corner of Fox Street and Longwood Avenue, where we split a malted. Neither were very sumptuous meals. Though both the delicatessen and the candy store served sandwiches and had accommodations enabling you to sit down and enjoy a modest repast, we did not take advantage.

On a few occasions, during my teen-age years, my mother and I would indulge in a dinner out, followed by a movie. It required elaborate planning. My mother worked in a garment shop downtown, so when she left work, instead of taking the Lexington Avenue subway to the Longwood Avenue station, (a block from our home), as she usually did, she would take the Seventh Avenue subway to the Prospect Avenue (elevated) station, a much longer walk home. On Prospect Avenue, were a cafeteria and two movie houses.

We would rendezvous some time after 5 pm. I would buy two tickets for the movie at either the RKO Franklin, or the Prospect Theatre, before the prices changed at 5, and wait for my mother at the bottom of the stairs. When she arrived, we would go to the Prospect Cafeteria and have supper, lining up at the serving counter and carefully choosing a sandwich, or meatloaf or a hamburger patty plate, vegetables, bread, perhaps a bowl of soup, and a glass of water. It was a treat, and we enjoyed the rare luxury of having food prepared by someone else. We were no longer in a hurry. It did not matter how much time we took. It did not matter when we entered the movie. The ticket taker never questioned the tickets we handed him. We had eaten well and we sat down and watched the show, until one of us said, “this is where we came in.” We may have done this a half dozen times, but it remains in my memory as a special occasion.

When we walked down Longwood Avenue after the movie, we passed the only restaurant in the neighborhood: Goldman’s Dairy Restaurant. My guess is that it opened in the 1920s, when upwardly mobile Jewish families were moving into the neighborhood. The place had class: white tablecloths, good silverware, waiters. We never went there. My mother looked inside, and it seemed a sadness came over her. There was a time when she may have dined in such a restaurant with my father. By the time I was in college, in 1945, Goldman’s had closed. The neighborhood was changing.

In 1942, at the age of 14, I was attending Stuyvesant High School, and working part-time, and a whole new world of “eating out” opened up for me. Most of the time, I would take a sandwich from home, which I would supplement with a drink, but on a few occasions, I would grab something at one of the luncheonettes or chains that I passed on the way from school on East 15th Street, to work on West 25th Street. There were no McDonald’s or

Burger Kings, but there were Nedicks and Chock Full of Nuts. There were also push carts selling knishes, pretzels, and hot dogs.

When I had a little more time, and a little more money, I would treat myself to a meal at a Horn and Hardart Automat. I got a kick out of them from my very first visit. They seemed to be all over town, though they were concentrated in midtown. I would walk in, hand the cashier a dollar, and get a dollar's worth of nickels. I would admire what seemed like hundreds of glass and steel compartments that lined the walls, and the polished marble floor. I usually headed for the sandwiches, inserted my nickels, the door opened, I removed my sandwich, got something to drink, and sat down at a nearby table. I sometimes bypassed the magical compartments and went to the serving counter, similar to the Prospect Cafeteria, where I would get a vegetable plate.

On my first dates, we did not go out to eat. It was always assumed that your date had already eaten. We would go to a movie, and end up at a soda fountain where we would order either an ice cream soda, or a sundae, a banana split, or pie a la mode. When I was a little older and in a position to spend a little more, we patronized chains like Bickfords, Howard Johnson, and even Childs.

By the time I graduated from college and knew my way around the city, my friends and I were on our way to being sophisticated diners. We had our favorite ethnic restaurants (Sevilla, Champlain), we discovered Greenwich Village, Chinatown and Little Italy. We joined the ranks of those New Yorkers who looked down their noses at the tourists and those not in the know, who went to Broadway and stood on line (in line?) at Lindy's or Mama Leone's. We may have come late to "eating out," but we were going to do it right. Price was still a consideration, but we learned about well prepared, and unusual dishes, and restaurants off the beaten path. We wanted more than pizza or chop suey. We had grown up, we had jobs, we were marrying. Now, when we went out, it was to dine at a fine restaurant, not to grab a bite after a show. We had arrived.

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