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The menus of tsars, queens and presidents reveal more than the food they ate, **Sarina Talip** discovers

Grand menus fair and fowl

I am sitting with Jake Smith in the Hyatt Hotel when his phone rings. For the past half an hour he has been studiously ignoring it – “It’s only the ABC, they’ll call back”.

Spending time with him has been pleasantly civilised. Sunlight spills from the rose gardens outside. In between tea and a delicate passionfruit and chocolate concoction, we have been discussing his book, *Eating With Emperors*.

Interspersed with original menu cards from emperors, kings, queens, presidents, princesses and the occasional maharajah, the book is a history lesson (of sorts) into dining habits dating back some 150 years.

Forward to the 21st century, Kevin Rudd has passed his health reforms and Smith (when he’s not collecting menus) is chief political adviser to the Queensland Liberal National Party leader John-Paul Langbroek, and before him Lawrence Springborg (now deputy leader).

His office has called a few times and finally he picks up. Till now, Smith has been delightful company as he recounts with all the glee of blogger Perez Hilton, the gossip surrounding the demanding world leaders. Beyonce’s demands for her room to be heated just so to maintain her voice seem tame by comparison.

But as Smith dictates slowly to the young staffer on the phone what she should tell the media (something about Anna Bligh, broken promises, and how one announcement doesn’t change everything), you can see why he’s in the job. He sounds like a tough-talking sheriff, every word deliberate. Then he hangs up and the change back to his sunny self is startling.

Smith says the book allowed him to

combine his great loves: history, politics and food. But it’s easy to see why he is attracted to the historic menus, immersed as he is in modern politics. One can’t imagine the infamous monk Rasputin being interrupted by a call on his Blackberry when he graced (or menaced) a royal Russian dinner.

“[The menu collecting is] an excuse to bring the old courts all back to life. It doesn’t mean you’re a monarchist, but it’s the love of the ceremony. It was all in an era before we had parliamentary public accounts committees,” he laughs.

Is that a shame? He takes his time answering.

“It’d be a shame if you were one of the people privileged to live it, but I think taxpayers these days would find it a bit offensive.”

Smith has 15 menus from the table of Queen Victoria. Diminutive though she was, she had an appetite to match her power, with 45 kitchen staff under the French chef, Juste Menager, an Egyptian coffeemaker dressed in fine silk and cotton robes, coal-porters who arrived each morning to light the stoves, and royal icemen who in winter cut blocks of ice from the rivers and stored them in the kitchen iceboxes.

And as Empress of India (even though she never set foot in the country), she insisted that during luncheons two Indian footmen wearing turbans and in shiny blue and gold silk braided uniforms stand behind her chair to prepare the curry (whether guests partook or not).

Downstairs there were another two Indian cooks who refused to cook with the high-quality imported curry powder, preferring instead to grind their

own between two large stones.

It follows that Queen Victoria’s menu cards were just as elaborate: gold-edged and embossed with the royal coat of arms and the Queen’s personal cipher VRI, Latin for Victoria Regina Imperatrix and even with a picture of the venue – tiny stag heads for Balmoral Castle in Scotland, and tiny sailing boats for Windsor Castle.

Descriptions of the dishes and the borders of tiny crowns, or flowers, or cherubs might also be hand painted.

Smith pulls out an elaborate menu for a wedding breakfast for Queen Victoria’s youngest daughter Princess Beatrice and Prince Henry of Battenberg.

Princess Beatrice caused a sensation when she decided to marry the inferior prince from the insignificant and impoverished principality buried somewhere in Germany.

Queen Victoria had planned a low-key, private wedding, but public contempt for the unequal match pushed her to turn the wedding into a state occasion on the Isle of Wight.

Even the menu is an exquisite work of art, with four cherubs at the top holding up a string of flowers and a sash with the date of the wedding: 23rd July 1885. The 22-course banquet is written inside a wooden trellis covered in white flowers – with a handpainted shield and sword for Prince Henry, and an easel and harp for Princess Beatrice.

“It’s ornate, it’s beautiful, it’s busy, it’s lacy, it’s Queen Victoria all over. She loves it being all pretty with flowers and cherubs – and kings don’t do that,” Smith laughs.

“When her son Edward VII takes over as King, the menus just have the royal cipher on the top and you lose all



the illustration.” He sounds sad.

But we’re not into King Edward VII’s reign yet, and at that wedding breakfast guests dined on one of the most prized game birds, ortolans, tiny songbirds that weighed just 30g in the wild. They were wrapped in vine leaves, spit-roasted and drizzled in a sauce made from port and Seville oranges.

The couple’s three-tiered wedding cake was surrounded by a wreath of lilies sculpted from sugar and at the top were cupids and a large vase of flowers also made from spun sugar and marzipan.

“It really does speak volumes about Queen Victoria’s love for her baby daughter, who was also a close confidante and later became her secretary.”

Next Smith shows me a menu from a dinner at Windsor Castle for the future Tsar Nicholas II, who was engaged to Victoria’s granddaughter, the German-born Princess Alexandra of Hesse. Attending the dinner was Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria, whose assassination 20 years later would trigger World War I.

On the menu was not much

romance (Baroness Buxhoeveden, a life-long confidante of the future Russian Empress, recalled how Queen Victoria “had strict ideas on chaperonage and never left the engaged couple alone”) but a range of dishes written in French. French was introduced as the language for royal menus in the early 1880s during the reign of King George IV, who was obsessed with all things French. British Royal menus are still written in French today.

So on the night of June 29, 1894, guests dined on delicacies such as “Potages a la Tete de Veau Claire” (consomme made from a deboned calf’s head, carrot, onion, celery, arrowroot and madeira and garnished with portions of poached calf’s head); “Releves” (roast haunch of venison); “Les Cailles” (roast quails stuffed with foie gras), and “Les Beignets de Semouille a l’Ananas” (pineapple-flavoured semolina fritters served with fruit preserves).

A side table also had hot and cold fowls, tongue and cold beef.

The historical significance of the Queen entertaining the last future emperor and empress of Russia is not

lost on Smith. But he’s also interested in the more prosaic details.

“The next morning, June 30, they have to be up nice and early because they have to open London’s Tower Bridge. I haven’t got the wine list, but I can imagine how much wine is drunk with this dinner. And I just can’t help thinking they were hung over when London Bridge opened. Is that a fair punt?” he cackles.

“The book is an excuse to tell stories and little gossip pieces and snippets of people who were at the dinner and their observations on the dinner or other people there. I’ve tried to make it a history book that’s not a boring text book.”

Whether or not the future Tsar and Tsarina of Russia were hung over when they officially opened London’s Tower Bridge is unclear. What is clear, though, is their important place in history.

After the February Revolution of 1917, the imperial family was in detention, their meagre rations a far cry from the grandeur that for centuries had been the hallmark of imperial dining.



When only the best will do: a menu from a dinner at Windsor Castle hosted by Queen Victoria at a dinner for then future Tsar Nicholas II in 1894.

Photo: Marina Nei



And on the night of July 16, 1918, Nicholas II, his wife and his five children were woken and marched to the basement, and shot.

But even in telling the story of the last Russian imperial family, Smith still insists on taking it beyond a history textbook.

“If we we read a history book on the last Emperor of Germany or Russia, or the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it’s very much causes of revolution or causes of World War I. It’s not, ‘Let’s have a look inside their home and see the rituals of them dining’,” Smith says.

Although the Tsar was always in immaculate uniform and the Tsarina in priceless jewels for family dinners, the atmosphere was like any other young family. The British ambassador, John Hanbury-Williams, recalled the meal-time antics of the Tsar’s son, who “would begin a bread pellet attack across the table and a game of what he called polo at me, with more bread pellets, which risked all the Imperial china and glasses pretty considerably”.

One menu from the Russian tsars holds particular intrigue for Smith. Dated September 1911, it is from a dinner at Mariyinsky Palace, Kiev, hosted by Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra, which Rasputin attended.

“You find out that Rasputin was at that dinner and that adds so much to it. What was he doing there? Sometimes what’s going on and who’s at the dinner is more fascinating than the food. Other times, it’s the reverse. But that menu was a splendid selection of food coupled with the fact that one of these intriguing characters from history was there,” Smith says.

Rasputin made guests uncomfort-

able with his sinister presence. “You have Rasputin in black monk outfit, greasy, long-haired, completely unwashed. He was a dreadful, dreadful creature, eating his food with his hands and a lot of the ladies who were friends of the Empress believed he had these divine magical powers and they would lick the food from his fingers thinking it to be somehow blessed.” Smith shudders.

But at that dinner someone else was noticeably absent because of his empty chair. Prime Minister Peter Stolypin had been shot in front of the Tsar and his daughters the night before at the Kiev Opera House.

Rasputin was blamed by some in court circles for orchestrating the assassination. “Some blame a large part of the fall of the Emperor on Rasputin’s meddling in the court, so the menu confirms, well, some of that is true. If Rasputin is at a palace banquet, it’s not just a rumour that he’s in the inner circle. He was a peasant from Siberia, and I can tell you, not a lot of peasants from Siberia would be at the Emperor’s dinner table.”

Whatever the dramatic undercurrents, compared with Queen Victoria’s menus, the Russian menu is striking in its simplicity – and written in French, as was the custom also in European courts (only the Wilhelm II insisted menus be written in German – even French dishes). The menu is gold-trimmed and the imperial coat of arms of the two-headed eagle embossed in black resin and then handpainted over.

“The tsar had 190 kitchen staff so you would expect something fairly impressive out of that and you have a

wonderful range of foods here,” Smith says.

Indeed: guests feasted on trout from Lake Taymene in Siberia; turkey; grouse; saddle of roasted venison studded with bacon strips marinated in

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cognac and chopped parsley; and duckling glazed in a citrus sauce and then in a chaud-froid sauce made from duck stock, eggs and butter.

“That’s course after course after course and in those days, that’s not a smorgasbord. And notice there’s not a lot of vegetables in that era, they didn’t go for vegetables, although they have this sorbet at the halfway mark. We eat sorbet now as a dessert but back then it was to lighten your stomach for the next onslaught of heavy dishes.”

Never mind that the decadent sorbet in this case was made from cham-



pagne (no doubt the real stuff), lemon and meringue, over which a glass of rum was poured.

But what's this? "I cook at home and if I'm having a [lot of] courses I'll have a sorbet before the main course," Smith admits sheepishly. "So I've perhaps been a little bit influenced by menu collection. None of this three-course meal stuff!" He laughs uproariously.

There are a smattering of recipes in the book, including plover's (or quail's) eggs in aspic jelly, and the whole stuffed wild boar's head from the Christmas menu of Queen Victoria, another dish Smith has attempted.

"I didn't think the book would be complete without a recipe for a whole stuffed wild boar's head, which I have tried twice," Smith says. "The first time was a spectacular failure, but I tried it again the next Christmas, although I didn't have the gold plate to present it on or the eight trumpeters to herald it into the room."

Smith acknowledges that rare menus are not a usual collector's obsession (although he does own newer menus from the tables of George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Queen Elizabeth II).

He started (although he didn't know it at the time) when he was in high school in the late 1980s. His family dined out a lot and went to "wonderful restaurants". His collection began when he asked famous French chefs in Paris restaurants to sign his menus.

Then one night he was watching television and up flashed then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher hosting an official dinner for the "king of somewhere" at 10 Downing

Street. He noticed on the menus were tiny crests. "The good thing was I knew her address: 10 Downing Street. I don't think they'd do this anymore with eBay and internet and email, but back in those days you'd write a letter in your best handwriting. So I wrote to the Prime Minister of Britain explaining that I collect menus and could you possibly send me some, and to my shock and delight about three or four weeks later, this little package from 10 Downing Street arrived with four menus from Margaret Thatcher. And so then I thought, oh that was easy. And on it went: Dear President Reagan, Dear Prince of Monaco."

But as Smith "got on with life" and started hankering after the rarer menus, he realised "nobody posts those to you free of charge". He's yet to find another royal menu collector and by accident became an expert on royal dining.

He owns hundreds of menus. The least he has paid was 10 euros on eBay for a menu from Tsar Alexander III of Russia with the accompanying music program ("They didn't know what it was, but I did, and that's not its value, it's worth thousands.") The priciest was just short of \$10,000.

Over the years major auction houses and dealers in rare manuscripts have come to know he is interested in menus and will contact him.

For someone who is so enamoured of past dining habits, Smith regrets how things have changed. When he was researching a dinner hosted by former US president Lyndon B. John-

son for the widowed Zara Holt (husband Harold Holt had drowned only three months earlier), he came across photographs in presidential libraries of the Holts and the Johnsons in the 1960s.

"They were clearly not hard at work and were just lounging around the White House pool with cocktails in their hands, indicating that in those days these things were perhaps far more genuine. Maybe there was more time on people's hands and they were able to develop real friendships."

At the dinner for Zara Holt, as well as lobster belle-vue, supreme of squab, wild rice and braised celery, they had a dessert called "spring basket Zara".

"Sometimes the stories are terribly significant and important, but this was a private little thank you dinner for Zara Holt, and how lovely he had a dessert named after her."

Smith suspects some of the magic has disappeared from the dining tables of world leaders and is now more ceremonial. But while the grandness of having 190 chefs creating a banquet would get taxpayers up in arms today, Smith isn't so sure about the pared-back 1960s, when for the inauguration lunch of John F. Kennedy guests were served cream of tomato soup with crushed popcorn.

"Is that not outrageous? That's an ordinary start to your presidency," Smith says. He pauses. "Does it lead to bad diplomatic relations if someone has a bad meal? I don't know."



Clockwise from far left, author Jake Smith examines an 1889 menu from the King of Saxony, at the Hyatt Hotel; a menu from a dinner hosted by Franz Joseph I, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary and Bohemia on May 9, 1881; and a menu from a dinner at Mariyinski Palace, Kiev, on September 2, 1911, hosted by Tsar Nicholas II and attended by Rasputin.

Photos: Marina Neil