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EATING WITH EMPERORS

By Jake Smith

Melbourne University Press,
310pp, \$59.99

Jake Smith, a "political adviser to the conservative parties" in Queensland, has a hobby. He collects menus. Not just any menus but the menus of European royalty, American presidents and other upper-crust luminaries.

This sumptuously produced book (gold lettering on the cover, lots of etchings and photographs, high-quality paper) is the story of some of them. There is an entire section devoted to Queen Victoria, another to the Russian royal family and another tracing White House banquets from the John F. Kennedy Inauguration Luncheon through to Barack Obama.

Two themes accidentally emerge: European royalty ate far too much of their own game and most formal banquets offer food that, in these days of discriminating haute cuisine, would be looked down on if served in a rural cafe. Lots of chook, boiled fish, beef, three veg and very little flair and imagination.

Still, with recipes such as "Whole Stuffed Wild Boar's Head" from one of Queen Victoria's Christmas nosh-ups, this is a wonderland of culinary excess.