

WHEN "OUR" PRINCESS Mary married the dapper Crown Prince of Denmark,

the palace chefs who crafted the royal wedding banquet didn't only have access to the finest ingredients on offer; they had access to an abundance of right royal ingredients, too. The racks of roast venison served to wedding guests, accompanied with a sautéed mushroom and morel sauce, came courtesy of some luckless deer that inhabited the private royal forests and fatally skipped in front of the crosshairs. And the accompanying glass or two of Cahors Château de Caix 1996 were sourced straight from the Danish royal family's private vineyards – located in France, not Denmark, of course.

When it comes to royal wedding "cook-offs", the Danes have a strategic culinary advantage over their British counterparts: the husband to the Queen of Denmark, Prince Henrik, is not only a renowned gourmet but also has two cookbooks published to his name – one book almost defensively titled *Not Always Foie Gras*. The Prince Consort is an adventurous foodie (who once controversially confessed to enjoying the flavour of dog-meat) and was no doubt behind the final decision, at Princess Mary's wedding, to drizzle sea-urchin sauce over the entrée of a timbale of Nordic Sea shellfish.

The Danish royal wedding banquet was a little more adventurous than the three courses on offer in 1981 at the wedding of Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer. To the background hum of *My Fair Lady*, the 150 wedding guests at Buckingham Palace were



# God Save The Chef

Compared with the gluttony of days gone by, this Friday's royal wedding banquet should be positively parsimonious, writes *Jake Smith*



*Royal Palace, Berlin, 1905* – The 10-course wedding banquet thrown by Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany for his son featured rare hens in full plumage

*Guildhall, 1911* – (left) Coronation luncheon for George V and Queen Mary, depicted in an oil painting by Solomon Joseph Solomon



served brill quenelles in a lobster sauce; sautéed chicken breasts stuffed with lamb mousse; and a rather ho-hum strawberries and cream for dessert.

Although the British royal family should be custodians of the Queen's English, the royal wedding menus have always been written in French; and they invariably feature dishes especially created for, and named after, members of the royal family themselves. When Queen Elizabeth II was married,

her wedding breakfast (which is actually served at lunchtime) featured Filet de Sole Mountbatten named after the groom; followed by Perdreau en Casserole (Casserole Partridges); and for dessert was an ice-cream dish called Bombe Glacée Princesse Elizabeth, named after the bride.

It was a similar story for the wedding of The Queen Mother, then Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, when she married the future King George VI in 1923. The feature dish

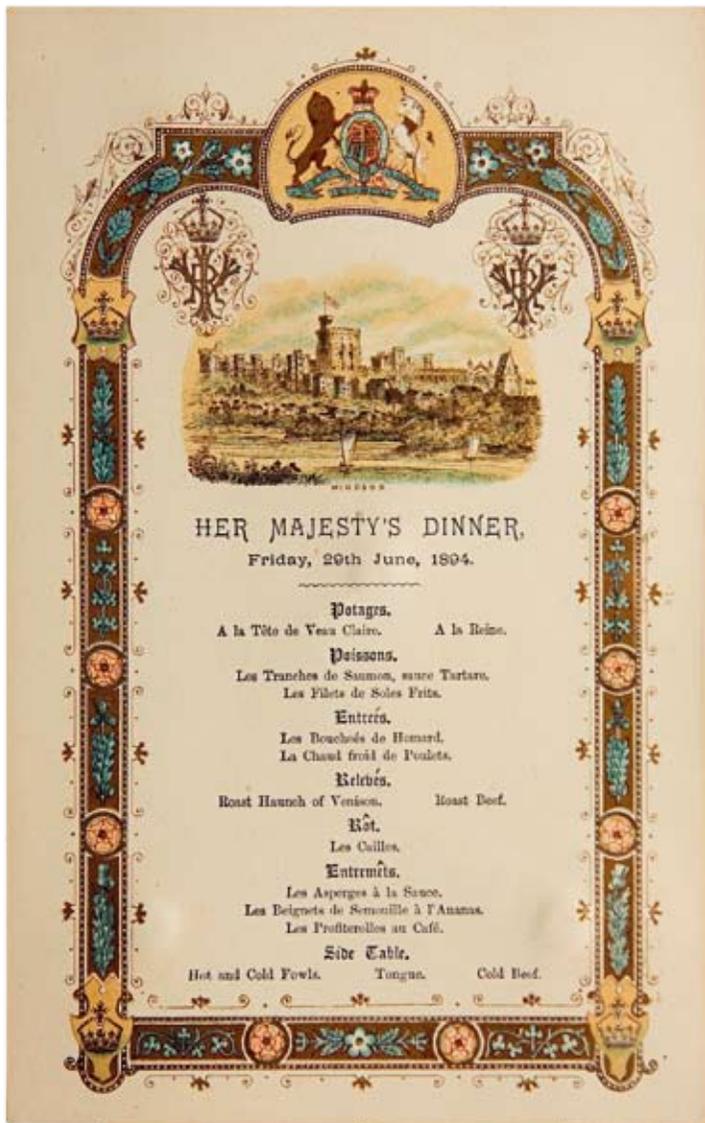
of Chapons à la Strathmore was named in honour of the bride's mother; it was a cold dish of capon breasts (from especially fattened castrated roosters) that were coated in a white sauce before being sealed in a thin layer of aspic jelly and decorated with the most ornately shaped slices of truffles and cured tongue.

But for all the training and finesse of the modern palace chef; for all the carefully sourced prized quality ingredients; and for all the

expertly matched fine wines, today's royal wedding banquets are positively pint-sized and frugal compared to those of more than a century ago.

In today's weight- and budget-conscious society, it would be inconceivable to replicate the 20-course royal wedding banquets provided by Queen Victoria for her endless string of betrothed children and grandchildren. The banquets were so large that, almost as if it were a culinary





**Windsor Castle, 1894** – Queen Victoria celebrates the betrothal of her granddaughter, Princess Alix of Hesse, to the future Tsar Nicholas II of Russia. The 12-course meal includes calf's head consommé, stuffed quails, salmon with tartare sauce, lobster-filled pastries, and profiteroles.

**Buckingham Palace, 1893** – a 16-course banquet for the future King George V and Queen Mary is hosted by the groom's grandmother, Queen Victoria. Dishes listed on the gold-leaf-embossed menu-card include sautéed chicken breast in watercress cream, duckling breast with garden peas, tongue in aspic jelly, and lobster salad.

gift for each wedding guest to take home as an edible and truly royal wedding souvenir.

It would also be a smidgen politically incorrect to serve Queen Victoria's favourite turtle soup, or to replicate the 22-course royal wedding breakfast she threw for her youngest and favourite daughter Princess Beatrice in 1885. Beneath silk marquees erected on the lawns of Osborne House, guests were treated to spit-roasted cute little yellow song-birds, called ortolans, which Queen Victoria had served wrapped in vine leaves

and drizzled in a Seville orange and Port sauce.

Eight years later, Victoria hosted a similarly extravagant royal wedding breakfast for her grandson and future King George V – until this month's wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, this was the last occasion that a reigning British queen hosted a wedding breakfast for a grandson who was an heir to the throne. The 16-course banquet, served on plates "acquired" from the Spanish Armada, was accompanied by a two-metre-high wedding cake –

which took five weeks to make – and pipped the weight of Queen Victoria's own wedding cake by 10kg. The royal confectioner admitted the creation had "put the greatest strain" upon him.

Moving away from Britain, it would also seem a bit extravagant, what with the global financial crisis and all, if this month's royal wedding banquet were to follow the example set in Vienna in 1881 by Emperor Franz-Joseph of Austria-Hungary. When he married off his only son and heir to the throne, Archduke Rudolph, guests

partook of a 16-course banquet that included puff pastries filled with puréed lark's breast mixed with truffles; boned woodcocks stuffed with foie gras (the silky livers from force-fed geese) glazed in madeira and cognac; lobster medallions dressed in béchamel sauce; and pig's kidneys flamed in rum and served with chipolata sausage and prunes steeped in red wine. The imperial wedding banquet was compiled with such pride that the name of the palace chef, responsible for the creations of each course, was written beside

the dish as it appeared on the gold-embossed menu-cards at the place-setting of each of the emperor's guests.

Likewise, the last emperor of Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II, was in the habit of dazzling dinner guests by serving game birds in full plumage: reassembled in life-like forms on silver platters with mounted heads and dressed in the bird's own feathers. That way, even when a humble chicken was to be served, rare breeds were especially chosen for their spectacular and colourful plumage as well as flavour. When the kaiser's eldest son and heir to the throne was married in 1905, the 10-course banquet featured the rare Hamburg hens dressed in their black-and-gold lacquered feathers.

The English-born governess to the kaiser's court, Anne Topham, was privileged to attend the royal wedding of the Kaiser's son and remembered how, after the wedding ceremony, "more quaint ceremonies take place" in the palace banquet hall. "The Prince

Furstenberg, as Marshal of the Court", recalled Topham in her memoirs, "serves the Emperor with soup; and the other royal guests are also waited on by pages and gentlemen of birth, who take the dishes from the footmen. The Lord High Steward or Truchsess pours out the wine, and in the middle of the dinner the Emperor proposes the health of the newly married pair."

Ironically, the cheapest royal wedding banquet belonged to the last tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, whose name and reign is usually associated with unrivalled imperial grandeur and ceremony.

At the beginning of November 1894, Nicholas was a 26-year-old bachelor crown prince (tsarevitch); by the end of the month, he was a married emperor. His father, Tsar Alexander III, had died just weeks before the wedding of Nicholas to Queen Victoria's granddaughter, Princess Alix of Hesse. The protocols of court mourning dictated that it would be quite unseemly to have a glut-

tonous royal wedding banquet just days after the funeral of the groom's imperial father: the 3000 wedding guests, therefore, went home with empty stomachs.

Left not so hungry, however, were some 40,000 factory workers in St Petersburg, who were given celebratory dinners at the tsar's personal expense – a gesture quickly forgotten and dismissed, obviously, by those nasty plotting revolutionaries.

The nearest the last tsar got to a royal wedding banquet was at Windsor Castle, five months before his marriage, when Queen Victoria insisted on hosting a celebratory dinner for Nicholas' betrothal to her granddaughter. "Her Majesty's Dinner", as the menu cards at each place setting read, consisted of 12 courses including calf's-head soup; puff pastries filled with lobster mousse; racks of venison roasted in front of the roaring open fire in the royal kitchen; quails stuffed with goose livers; and a rather homely dessert of pineapple-semolina fritters

(beignets) served with jams and fruit preserves.

And just as the culinary grandeur and decadence of royal wedding banquets isn't quite what it used to be, nor are the menu-cards placed upon the table of each guest. Gone are the hand-coloured cherubs that decorated the borders of royal menus; gone are the embossed and gold-highlighted floral arrangements on the menus that were especially designed to match the flowers in the bride's dress; gone is the imperial lithographer permanently employed by the Kaiser; and gone are the watercolours of the palace venues. Today's royal menus simply carry the monarch's cipher embossed in a little silver-leaf – all very boring and understated.

"When I joined the royal household," scoffed royal chef Gabriel Tschumi, who first worked at Buckingham Palace in 1898, "a menu was never written on a plain white sheet of card-board." Indeed not. 