

A few royal morsels

DOWNSTAIRS at Buckingham Palace is an elite unit called F-Branch. It sounds like the name of a covert surveillance team or crack security unit but it is in fact the royal kitchens, with the F standing for the four-letter word food. Bustling around in the kitchens is the Royal Chef, who leads a kitchen army over 30-strong that includes 20 other chefs and a range of apprentices and sous chefs.

F-Branch doesn't only prepare the meals for the Royal Family; it also cooks for the more than 400 palace staff and even the Queen's favourite corgis, who demand a well-balanced diet.

"Of course, I cooked for the corgis, they had their food sent up to them once a day," recounted former palace chef Graham Newbould, who once revealed the royal canines ate a diet usually consisting of boiled rabbit or lambs' livers.

It seems the royal canines have historically benefited from the culinary expertise of the palace chefs. A century earlier, the Royal Chef to King Edward VII recalled how "twice a day a footman came to the kitchens to get the food for the dogs; and we kept aside tasty pieces of beef, fish or chicken for them."

Today, comfortable in the knowledge that their corgis have slept with contented bellies, both Queen Elizabeth II and her husband, the Duke of Edinburgh, start their day at 8am with a pot of tea, freshly squeezed orange juice and a cooked breakfast of bacon, sausages or kippers served with eggs cooked in a different style each day. It is said the Queen prefers her eggs fried or scrambled while her husband prefers an omelet. Lunch is served just after 1pm with high tea at 5pm and dinner at 8.15pm.

Like that of her predecessors, much of the food served at the table of the Queen is home-grown. The royal farms at Windsor date from the reign of George III and are home to two royal dairy herds in addition to livestock, crops and greenhouses. And from Balmoral Castle and Sandringham the royal menus often feature game meats that may well include a duck or partridge or two shot by Her Majesty herself. The Queen's favourite game is reportedly pheasant and there are a few stored frozen in the palace kitchens for an emergency.

As a rule, Buckingham Palace refrains from revealing the culinary likes and dislikes of its chief resident. As the Queen's correspondence secretary once explained:

Her Majesty doesn't express preferences because that could lead to all sorts of complications. If she said she liked lemon sponge, she'd never be offered anything else. She does say she won't eat shellfish, but that's just being sensible.

Consequently, the Queen's culinary preferences are only sometimes exposed in the memoirs of former palace staff — who can be tempted to embellish their stories in pursuit of more lucrative publishing deals — or by the observations of other royal courts. In the early 1970s, for example, on the eve of the Queen's arrival in the Middle East as a guest of the then Shah of Iran, the Minister to Iran's Imperial Court noted in his diary:

Submitted the menu for tomorrow's lunch in honour of the Queen of England. His Imperial Majesty changed virtually everything, insisting, for example, that the Queen dislikes caviar and that pate de foie gras should be served in its place.

Cooking for the British monarch has changed considerably since the early 1800s when King George IV was crowned and offered his peckish guests a coronation treat of 20 entrees, 22 main courses and 31 desserts. By comparison, the royal chefs have an easy job of it today. Any cursory glimpse of the Buckingham Palace menus shows the Queen is no glutton and understands full well the importance of a balanced diet, an

attitude no doubt encouraged by the obtrusive camera lenses of a modern press. The days of the British monarch having to rest and settle the royal stomach by consuming rum-flavoured sorbet halfway through a 12-course meal are as dead as Queen Victoria herself.

Royal cooking has modernised like that of any other kitchen in the world, with the Queen's meals usually consisting of just three courses that include a healthy serving of salads, vegetables or fruit. Simple preparations of lamb, chicken, beef and fish

feature just as regularly on the Queen's menu as in any other household in Britain.

Up until 2002, her Royal Chef was Lionel Mann, who first began working in the palace kitchens 40 years earlier when he helped out with preparations for the wedding of the Queen's sister, Princess Margaret. After Mr Mann retired, Mark Flanagan became Royal Chef.

Menus at the royal table continue to be written in French and use the same design introduced by the Queen's great-grandfather, Edward VII, of a plain card with gold trimming and embossed royal cipher. Only once, that anyone can remember, did the Queen allow the Buckingham Palace menus to be written in the Queen's English. It happened that both Paris and London were vying for the 2012 Olympic Games, so when it came time to royally entertain the International Olympic Committee by promoting the London bid over the Paris bid, the Queen ensured there was nothing remotely French in sight. Instead, the menu was written in English and the wines came from her loyal and royal allies, Australia and New Zealand.

The real challenge for royal chefs today is not so much in satisfying the royal appetite, but rather the challenge is in catering for the royal guests. State banquets are usually held at Windsor Castle in St George's Hall, which seats up to 171 guests all at one table that runs the length of the room.

On these occasions the staff is dressed in ceremonial uniforms and the Queen's finest crockery and cutlery are dusted off and polished up to match a menu offering the finest dishes made from the finest ingredients.

When the palace table is set, there are five glasses placed with one each for red and white wine, champagne, water and port. The distance between each place setting is



measured with a ruler and there is a special stick to measure the distance from a chair to the table. From the head of the table, the Queen or Head Steward discreetly operates a series of concealed coloured lights that directs the kitchen and lining staff on when to serve and clear dishes.

It is rare in the extreme for a visiting head of state to be served a banquet they find less than appetising. In 1977 an exclusive club was cleverly created called the Club des Chefs des Chefs (Club of Chefs to the Chiefs); it has more than 30 members, all of whom are the head chefs to the serving kings, queens, princes and presidents of the world. The club members meet annually, rotate the chairmanship among themselves, swap ideas and sample new cuisines and techniques in whichever exotic corner of the world they decide to call their annual meeting. They communicate regularly and set themselves apart from the head chefs of the world's leading restaurants by making the downplayed claim that they are just someone's domestic staff.

They are of course treated like royalty themselves wherever they go.

EXTRACT Ladelling out to the world's emperors, kings, queens, and the occasional corgi, is a job for the most regal of chefs, writes **Jake Smith**.

The Age, 26 November 2009

This is an edited extract from *Eating with Emperors*. The Miegunyah Press, \$59.99.