

Inaugural ball food: from foie gras to peanuts

By Tim Carman, *Washington Post*

Even in 1889, as crews prepared for President Benjamin Harrison's inaugural ball under the eerie artificial light of the Pension Building's newfangled incandescent lamps, planners had a bad case of Gotham envy.

Hired to mastermind the massive feast for the ball, Philadelphia hotelier George C. Boldt told a *Washington Post* reporter that he was "determined to show the New York Delmonico idolaters that there was no monopoly of the feasting business in that city."

Now, I can't vouch for the accuracy of that quote because, despite describing the evening's dresses, grand marches and banquet preparations with the kind of baroque detail that would make Michener blush, the *Post* reporters assigned to Harrison's inauguration apparently couldn't be bothered to use quotation marks when interviewing sources. But I can safely assume that Delmonico's, then our country's best gustatory stab at French sophistication, could not match the spread that Boldt and his team had prepared for the new president and his 15,000 guests.

According to the paper's account, the throng gobbled down 40,000 raw oysters, 20,000 steamed oysters, 20,000 oysters a la poulette, 300 gallons of consomme, 7,000 chicken croquettes, 7,000 sweetbread patties, 7,000 roll sandwiches, 300 gallons of chicken salad, 200 gallons of lobster salad, 150 beef tongues, 150 Virginia hams, 150 turkeys, 1,000 quail, 800 pates de foie gras "a la Harrison," 500 pounds of terrine of "game a la Morton" (a reference to Vice President Levi Morton), 300 quarts of Roman punch and 300 gallons of

terrapins.

Compare that sumptuous 19th-century banquet to the food expected at President Obama's Commander-in-Chief's and Inaugural balls on Monday at the Walter E. Washington Convention Center. According to the Presidential Inaugural Committee, the reception-style meals will include "similar items from previous years, including an assortment of pastas and crudites."

The architect of the 2013 inaugural ball menus will not be a self-made millionaire like Boldt, who virtually invented the luxury-hotel lifestyle. It will be Centerplate, the giant food service company better known for feeding us roller-grilled weenies at ballparks. The food appears to be such an afterthought that neither the Presidential Inaugural Committee nor Centerplate is releasing menus for review.

Organizers, however, did feed us a little spoonful of sugar to help the crudites go down: "In keeping with our efforts to keep the costs down and make this accessible to the American public, the menu is both celebratory and appropriate given the nation's ongoing economic recovery," a committee spokeswoman e-mailed me.

So how did official inaugural balls go from a feast fit for the four-star appetite of Diamond Jim Brady – or at least the mythical Diamond Jim Brady – to one that requires a trip to the Mickey D's drive-through afterward? Most people I spoke to indicated that budget and security have been the driving factors in keeping food in check.

Eric Michael, co-founder of Occasions Caterers in Washington, remembers when he attended one of Ronald Reagan's official balls in 1981. It was held at the Kennedy Center and, unlike some sumptuous soirees tied to the Great Communicator's inauguration, this one offered a spread of peanuts and pretzels, Michael recalls. There was a cash bar, too.

"I think it's, frankly, an economic issue," Michael says. "They want to keep ticket prices as low as possible."

Design Cuisine of Arlington has supplied snacks for seven official balls, all at Union Station, dating from the '80s. "With the first one and second one, it was a little bit more food, but from then on, it began diminishing," says co-owner Bill Homan.

Although Obama's inaugural ball food is meant to signal gustatory austerity in tough economic times, other presidents have used their grand celebrations to make different statements. Historical accounts credit James Madison in 1809 with the first official inaugural ball held at Long's Hotel on Capitol Hill, a party that attracted 400 of Washington's elite. A *Washington Post* retrospective look at balls in 1933 pegs first lady Dolley Madison as the instigator of this tradition. "She loved society and all its doings," wrote an unnamed author.

Subsequent galas sometimes had a more egalitarian air, like President Lincoln's second-term ball in 1865. Tickets were \$10 each for the party at the Patent Office, but as a *Post* story told it, "each gentleman could bring as many ladies as he chose and some brought half a dozen." The scene turned ugly during a midnight supper of terrapin stew, foie gras, leg of veal, cakes and tarts.

"As soon as the doors were thrown open, one thousand hungry persons tried to push their way in at one time," The *Post* account relates. "The crush which followed can better be imagined than depicted."

Incoming presidents seemed to play a game of one-upsmanship with their inaugural balls in the mid- to late 19th century: James Buchanan, James Garfield and Harrison each staged parties with Brobdingnagian banquets worthy of NFL training tables. A Los Angeles Times report noted that Garfield's 1881

inauguration dinner featured 15,000 “assorted cakes.” Only Rutherford B. Hayes, whose controversial election was confirmed only days before his swearing in in 1877, did not have an inaugural ball in that era.

The 20th century, that period of world wars and psychoanalysis, coincided with American presidents casting a cynical eye on inaugural balls. Woodrow Wilson, in fact, canceled the whole affair. It took Harry Truman – that Missouri farm boy – to revive the official ball in 1949, and John F. Kennedy took it to new heights. He attended a then-record five balls, one featuring two 500-pound cakes decorated with the president’s and vice president’s visage in icing.

Leave it to Jimmy Carter, who lived in public housing for a year, to bring the inaugural ball back down to earth. He refused to call them balls. To him, they were “parties.” The final touch for Carter’s parties? An homage to his roots and staple of his family’s business: peanuts.

To Carter, the peanut was a sign of hope. He had reversed his own fortunes with the lowly legume, but the snack would turn out to be a metaphor for the food to come at future inaugural balls: It would soon be “peanuts.”