

BREAKFAST BUFFETS

What do self-service meals tell you about a hotel?

(The Sunday Telegraph, 2006)

Breakfast at the Savoy is an undeniably grand occasion. The tables are draped with fine pink and white linen, and laid with delicate Royal Doulton china; festoons of curtain embellish the windows looking directly out on to the River Thames; the light from the elegant chandeliers gleams on the distinguished pates of businessmen as they cross the floor to help themselves to Bircher muesli.

Just a minute – help *themselves*? Is this not a hotel whose name is synonymous with first-class service? Should a guest here be permitted to do *anything* unattended by a flock of highly starched waiters?

Strange as it may seem, the breakfast buffet – once the preserve of budget resorts – has now infiltrated some of the smartest hotels in the land. Indeed, *how* a hotel presents its buffet has almost become a litmus test of its style and efficiency.

‘The introduction of the buffet was debated long and hard, I can tell you,’ says the Savoy’s spokeswoman Pam Carter. ‘We resisted for years and years. But in the end we gave in to pressure from guests. Some people just prefer it.’

This may be true: after all, if you are desperate to get going in the morning, the minutes spent waiting for someone to bring you a plate of Arbroath smokies can be agonising. On the other hand, traditionalists are quick to point out, the best food is served fresh from the kitchen – and in any case, a hotel’s whole *raison d’être* is to look after its guests. In the words of Dorian Rommel of the Dorchester (one of the few places to hold out against

you're paying all that money? You're not going to impress a client at a breakfast meeting if he has to get up to fetch himself half a grapefruit.'

Whatever your view, few would deny that the rise of the buffet has been driven mainly by hoteliers keen to increase profit margins. 'Buffets suit hotels because they don't need so many staff and they don't have to train them to such a high level,' explains Henry Chebaane, a former manager of the Berkeley and the Hempel, who now runs the Blue Sky Hospitality consultancy. But, he adds, the economy is often a false one: 'If you don't put the same effort into the breakfast buffet as you do into fine dining in the evening, you're not going to impress your guests or earn their loyalty.'

Staying at a four-star hotel in Milan recently, I discovered just how wrong a buffet can go. So unequal were the staff to coping with the large number of guests that it was impossible to find a clean table, let alone someone to bring you tea or coffee. The desiccated scrambled eggs tasted like polystyrene, and the last *pains au chocolat* were bitterly contested.

John Hatt, author of *The Tropical Traveller* and a connoisseur first-class hotels, regards the spread of the buffet as 'an abomination'. 'Breakfast,' he argues, 'is an incredibly important meal, because it sets you up for the day, and unlike lunch or dinner, you almost always have it in your hotel. Hot food should be made freshly for you – it doesn't involve a lot of effort. But most hotels can't be bothered, and ironically the food in B&Bs is usually much, much better.' Among his pet hates are over-sweetened fruit juice in tiny glasses, queuing at oversubscribed toasters, badly made coffee, and plastic cartons of butter. 'Perhaps the defining test of a good hotel is whether they bring you a dish of butter – and there are quite a few five-star hotels that don't.'

So why do we put up with the DIY breakfast, given that it comes – unlike

two things that appeal to guests,' says Henry Chebaane. 'First, it's equivalent to shopping – people like being able to see what they're choosing; and secondly, they can set the pace, depending on whether they're in a hurry or they want to take time to read the newspapers.' Children of an independent age particularly enjoy loading their own plates, though mothers trying to balance a baby and a bowl of porridge may be less enthusiastic.

What people emphatically do *not* want is cooked food which has sat in a chafing dish for half an hour, steadily losing its freshness and its flavour. The good news is that more and more hotels are recognising this, and moving towards a hybrid breakfast which is part self-service, part cooked to order.

'We do a buffet for cereal, organic yoghurt and so on,' says Richard Matthews of the Warpool Court hotel in St David's, 'but all the hot items are listed on a menu and come fresh from the kitchen. We have 25 bedrooms, with up to 55 guests, and we find that a single chef can easily cater for that number.'

The Four Seasons Hampshire offers a further refinement: a chef stationed actually at the buffet, cooking omelettes and waffles to order in front of the customers' eyes. This not only emphasises freshness, but adds a cheering sense of theatre to the proceedings – again, a useful way of keeping children happy. To anyone who has stayed at a hotel where boiled eggs are laid out in trays labelled '2 minutes', '3 minutes' and '4 minutes', such a luxury is breakfast nirvana.

Patrick Johns of One and Only Resorts agrees that this is the way forward. 'We try to have the kitchen in the restaurant as far as possible, so dishes are cooked there and then, the food is constantly replenished, and there's no queue. We even have glass rotating ovens so that you can watch

your croissant going golden brown in front of you. You can't get any fresher than that.'

Two other elements that enlightened hoteliers emphasise are variety and flexibility. 'We have six types of local sausage on offer, and three types of bacon, and we try to have the buffet looking as good at the end as it does at the beginning,' says John Wood of the Grove in Hertfordshire. 'You want the food to be fresh, but it's also important not to run out of things, so you have to anticipate peaks and troughs. On Sunday morning, all the guests come down at 10 am, and 80 per cent of them want cooked breakfasts; whereas during the week it's predominantly corporate business, and a lot of people just want to grab a croissant and a cup of coffee.'

What hotels should be thinking about now, says Henry Chebaane, is designing imaginative restaurants which are specifically geared to breakfast. At the new Marriott in Ghent, which opens this summer, his company has gone back to the building's original incarnation as a merchant's house to create a breakfast room in the form of a traditional kitchen, with a large oak table in the middle, Le Creuset pots, and plates displayed in open dressers.

'It's important to give guests an experience,' he argues. 'Do you hear people talking about a hotel and saying, "It has a really good breakfast buffet?" No – but perhaps one day you will.'

Ends