

World

State banquets are slimming down

An auction of menus shows how 18-course dinners are now a thing of the past, writes Adam Sage in Paris

The state banquet laid on by President Macron for the King last autumn featured blue lobster and crab, corn-flavoured Bresse chicken, a cheese platter and macaroon with rose petal cream, raspberries and lychees.

Some commentators described the four-course meal as lavish, although this is questionable. By comparison with yesteryear, it was frugal.

In 1913, when George V made a state visit to France, for instance, Raymond Poincaré, his presidential host, offered a 12-course meal that included trout, lamb, foie gras, young Bresse chickens with pike stuffing and hams glazed with Marsala.

The shrinkage of state banquets, which has been a trend over the past century, is underlined by a forthcoming auction of menus from meals served to French presidents, British monarchs and other world leaders. The collection, which spans 155 years of gastronomic diplomacy, is that of Christophe Marguin, a renowned chef from Lyons.

"This is part of the history of France and Britain," said Marguin, whose family has been in the restaurant business for five generations.

He has 4,000 or so menus from state luncheons and dinners given by French heads of state, or laid on for them on their travels. In addition, he has more than 600 from banquets in Britain.

A notable item in the collection is a menu from the banquet given by General de Gaulle, then the French president, for President Kennedy at the Palace of Versailles in June 1961. They ate a meal that included Renaissance beef fillet paired with a 1953 Château Cheval Blanc — although no one paid much attention to the food, or indeed to JFK, as his wife, Jacqueline, stole the show.

Marguin, 56, said that he was struck by the dwindling quantity of food consumed. In 1904, for instance, the Entente Cordiale was marked by an 18-course meal given to Edward VII by Emile Loubet, the French president of the day. When Elizabeth II was greeted by President Chirac to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Franco-



Menus from state banquets, including that for the King last year, show that quantities of food served to world leaders such as President Kennedy, right, in 1961, have been dwindling



British agreements, she was rationed to five courses.

"A hundred years ago, they had nothing else to do but eat so they took their time," Marguin said. "They blocked four or five hours for the meal. Today, we have smartphones, computers, aeroplanes, private jets and everyone is always in a hurry." He said that French presidents were now expected to eat in 45 minutes, with guests who dallied over their food likely to have the dishes removed before they were finished.

Opinions vary as to the merits of the old five-hour banquet. Some observers believe they offered world leaders an

unique opportunity to establish a personal relationship. Others suggest that indigestion risked souring the mood. All, however, agree that they are about more than food. Diplomats say they are used to highlight power and prestige, particularly in France, where it is hoped that guests will rise from the table full of admiration for the host country.

Marguin said not all visitors were treated equally, with the wine list providing an indication of their importance. Queen Elizabeth, for instance, was always given the finest possible bottles because "she was highest in the protocol order". In 2004, the French

served her a 1990 Château Yquem, a 1988 Château Mouton Rothschild, and a 1993 Dom Pérignon champagne. "It's as good as you can get," said Marguin, who added that lesser figures sometimes had to make do with two good but not great wines and no champagne.

The menu collection — estimated to be worth about €150,000 — is to be sold at auction in Paris in May. It features many British royal family menus written in French, the language used by the monarchy at banquets for the best part of 1,000 years. A dinner served to Queen Victoria in 1885 featured potage à la tête de veau (calf's head soup), for

example, while Charles and Diana's wedding breakfast in 1981 included suprême de volaille Princesse de Galles (Princess of Wales chicken supreme). Prince William and Kate did things differently. When they married in 2011, the menu, which included organic lamb and Highgrove spring vegetables, was written in English.

Marguin is selling his collection because he fears that it could be lost if it remains in his family. He hopes that it will go to a single bidder and kept intact. Asked whether Britain or France had the best banquets, he refused to answer "because I don't want to upset you".

Australia aims to ease wine glut by toasting new deal with China

Australia
Bernard Lagan Sydney

With enticing aromas of plum, blackcurrant and dark cherry, not to mention a "subtle undertone of mocha and spice", the Taylors Heritage Shiraz of 2022 achieved a perfect 100-point rating and was crowned champion at international wine awards.

In Sydney, however, a bottle can be picked up for just a tanner as Australia drowns in a sea of unsold red amid a crippling "wine war" with Beijing.

A glut of red wine, enough to fill about 900 Olympic-sized swimming pools, may be good news for drinkers, but winemakers are hoping that a visit by China's foreign minister next week

will bring an end to their pain.

China imposed tariffs exceeding 200 per cent on Australian wine at the height of a diplomatic row in 2021, ruining overnight Australia's biggest wine market as Beijing sought retribution over a range of grievances. These included Canberra's call for an international inquiry into the origins of Covid and its support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

The sudden death of a market worth A\$1.3 billion (£670 million) annually has sent winemakers to the wall and forced the destruction of millions of vines. Across the wine country of southern New South Wales and South Australia, scenes of heavy machinery ripping out vines have become common.

"We've left red on the vines, we've got people pulling vines out — it's been disastrous, we just can't afford to keep going," Bruno Brombal, 72, who owns a vineyard near Griffiths in New South Wales, said yesterday.

Australia, the world's fifth biggest wine exporter, now has more than two billion litres of mostly red wine in storage, with winemakers desperate to offload it at rock-bottom prices.

Brombal has begun cultivating citrus fruits as he fears the industry will still struggle when China opens its doors. "Remember, we've lost the [Chinese] market to the rest of the world too," he said. "So it's going to be difficult to push them out and get in but we got very good quality wine. So we might be

able to get back in slowly."

Wang Yi, Beijing's foreign minister, will visit Australia for the first time in seven years next week. His trip was announced on Tuesday, hours after China's commerce ministry put out a draft determination that the tariffs on Australian wine were no longer necessary. There are high hopes that there could be a breakthrough when Wang meets Australia's foreign minister, Penny Wong, in Canberra on Wednesday.

Even under optimistic assessments it will take at least two years to

clear Australia's oversupply of wine, equivalent to 2.8 billion bottles, should China ease tariffs, according to the agribusinesses lender Rabobank.

Some of the damage may never be repaired. "A lot of these guys are pulling up the grapes, you've got empty dirt, empty spare land and grape growing was all they've known for their whole life," Andrew Calabria, whose family are among Australia's largest producers, said. "The mental challenges come — that's the hard part to bear."



China's President Xi is a fan of red wine