

# The Savoury Course at Oxford and Cambridge Colleges

*Paul Freedman*

ABSTRACT: The savoury course, a small piquant dish coming after the sweet but before the dessert, is a uniquely British idea. It grows out of a final course that mixed sweet and non-sweet *entremêts*. By 1870, it had been separated from the sweet. The savoury was particularly to be found in clubs and other largely or exclusively male associations, including Oxford and Cambridge colleges. This talk looks at college menus during the period of efflorescence, 1870-1939 and the reasons for the savoury's survival after the War and eventual near extinction.

---

The savoury survives in a few odd corners, but its glory years, from the 1870s until the Second World War, are gone. A small spiced or salty course served between the sweet and dessert, it is uniquely British. Typical savouries are Welsh rarebit, devils or angels on horseback, Scotch woodcock, herring roes or milt on toast. Curry and other piquant flavours were popular as was baked or toasted cheese. Many savouries were on toast (*en croûte*) or canapés (bread trimmed of crusts and toasted or fried). From 1904 to 1932 the Reform Club created no less than 46 *croûtes* including *croûte Indienne* (presumably involving curry) and more mysteriously *croûte Alexandre le Grand*, and *croûte Murrumundi*.

141

Savoury as an identifying course name dates from the 1870s, by which time Mrs. de Salis could entitle the first cookbook devoted to the subject *Savouries à la mode* (1877).<sup>1</sup> The innovation, which took place between 1850 and 1870, was in separating out the savoury to form a service of its own rather than as an accompaniment to pastry and pudding. A penultimate course mixing sweet and savoury, essentially a medieval invention, persisted in Britain well into the Victorian period. In the 1850s, Catherine (Mrs. Charles) Dickens in *What Shall We Have For Dinner?* reflects a transitional moment in which one dinner might see cold lemon pudding served simultaneously with bloaters and another tarts and puddings *followed* by dressed crab.<sup>2</sup>

The emergence of a distinct savoury course out of what had been a miscellaneous assortment of *entremêts* was facilitated by the gradual adoption of Russian service. If instead of having all sorts of dishes brought to the table simultaneously, there are six, eight, a dozen successive courses, why not present an amusingly unexpected small but sharp-flavoured last or nearly-last course? Other factors favouring the savoury's origination include the occasional cheese course; serving dessert wines, particularly Port, after the meal; coffee – all relatively new forms of prolonging the meal. Naturally this does not explain why no one outside Britain thought the savoury a good idea.

## The Savoury Course at Oxford and Cambridge Colleges

We cannot identify one single moment when the savoury was ‘invented’, nor did anyone claim credit for it. By 1886, however, Mary Allen, author of *Savouries and Sweets Suitable for Luncheons and Dinners*, could pronounce without the likelihood of contradiction that these, ‘piquant little dishes’ were ‘universally served between the sweets and the dessert’.<sup>3</sup>

The prolific journalist and gourmand George Augustus Sala disapproved of the savoury because it spoiled appreciation of dessert fruit. Oddly, he blamed the innovation on women. In *The Thorough Good Cook* (1885), he conceded ruefully ‘I know perfectly well, however, that when a lady has made up her mind to anything, that the thing has got to be done; and so I have carefully selected some recipes for savouries’.<sup>4</sup> Apart from this eccentric instance, it was generally agreed that the savoury was a male preference. Women were always regarded as fond of sweets and men were at least sometimes thought partial to robust and spicy flavours. Whatever the truth of this as a general observation, the true home of the savoury, much more than household or restaurant, was the male association: clubs, livery companies, Inns of Court and Oxford and Cambridge colleges. What follows is devoted to the colleges, appropriate to our conference’s home in Oxford even if in this disastrous year 2020 we are meeting virtually.

### Oxford and Cambridge

142

In terms of which savouries were favoured and the chronology of their rise and decline, the Oxford and Cambridge colleges do not differ greatly from London clubs or similar fellowships. As with clubs, the older male foundations were more splendid than the newer and less generously endowed women’s institutions. My impression, and it is preliminary rather than assured, is that female clubs and colleges did not have savouries. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf famously compared the luxurious dining of a nameless male college with an indifferent dinner at ‘Fernham’, a women’s college. True, a going down song at Somerville (sung to the tune of the ‘Skye Boat Song’) recalls sybaritic pre-war pleasures:

Potatoes galore, chicken and beef  
Cake every day for tea,  
Biscuits for lunch, and chocolate too;  
Saturday savoury.<sup>5</sup>

One would like to know what that Saturday savoury was, but it is unlikely to have been a dinner course. Menus from the Somerville archives have nothing to say about savouries.

Oxbridge colleges are distinct in that the fellows and guests leave the Hall for a cosier and more informal Common or Combination room in order to take dessert, post-prandial wines and coffee. This is the reverse of the dinner-party convention of ladies leaving the table for the men to drink Port and then re-joining for coffee. The concluding acts reflect a desire for a less formal last phase of dinner that goes back to late-medieval conventions of the banquet, originally a kind of supper during which women and men could converse.<sup>6</sup>

## The Savoury Course at Oxford and Cambridge Colleges

Colleges archives preserve different chronological ranges for reports of their meals and somewhat different types of documentation. Trinity College, Cambridge, has a large run of menus from 1890 to the 1930s and many are for routine dinners rather than special feasts. Christ Church records cover the same period and beyond, but only for gaudies and other festive events. All Souls preserves few menus but numerous ‘menu books’ and ‘dinner books’, records kept by the kitchen and service staff that also list the expenses.

A Trinity menu for Ascension Day, 22 May, 1884 gives a sense of the splendid level of dining as well as a context for the embryonic savoury, not yet a course of its own.<sup>7</sup> The first course consists of two soups (consommé à l’Archiduchesse and à la Mongol) followed by three fish (turbot, salmon and fried fillets of sole). The entrées are fried sweetbreads à l’impériale and leveret timbale with sauce chasseur. Four joints (*relevés*) come next: spring chickens with tarragon, tongue, chine of lamb with cucumber sauce, and sirloin of beef. The roast course consists of green geese and quails, served with peas. Finally the *entremêts* are a pudding (à la Leopold), strawberry jelly, an assortment of ice-cream ‘boats’ and *diablotins de gruyère*, a cheese *croûte*.

Shortly thereafter, the savoury, although unnamed as a course, was clearly separate. At Trinity’s 1886 May Ball Dinner, the rubric ‘Sweets’ comprised strawberry jelly, claret jelly, and brown-bread cream, iced. This was followed by cheese straws under the heading ‘Cheese’. The Vice Master’s Dinner menu for 1888 lists three dishes as ‘Entremêts’: *poudings soufflés à l’Ananas*, *gelées au Kirsch* and Maids of Honor. Then *bombes à l’Indienne*, and finally, set off from the rest, *pailles au Parmesan*. Savouries, unspecified but ‘various’ first appear specifically in 1897. At the Feast of the Audit at the end of 1898, we see for the first time what would become the pattern: courses labeled *Entremêt* (including ‘Hindostan pudding’), Ice (brown bread and Curaçao) and Savoury (bloater roe and minced haddock toasts).

Beginning somewhat earlier than at Trinity, All Souls meals often concluded with a savoury.<sup>8</sup> Because of its special nature of a college without resident undergraduates, All Souls dinners were small. The dinner book for 1878 notes five for dinner on 12 October at which the following were served:

- Vermicelli Soup
- Turbot, Shrimp Sauce
- Curried Rabbit
- Leg of Mutton
- Windsor Pudding
- Salad
- Bloaters

Fourteen fellows and guests were present at dinner on 17 November, a Sunday nine-course affair at which, after a game course of snipe, there was a sweet consisting of jelly and plum pudding and finally haddock.

## The Savoury Course at Oxford and Cambridge Colleges

Before the First World War, a savoury was common if not inevitable. In the interwar period, All Souls seems to have let the savoury lapse, but Trinity maintained its enthusiasm and even presented its own invention, 'Champignons Alma Mater'. Jesus College similarly saw a consistent inclusion of savouries once the First War was over, particularly dinners for student groups such as 'The Natives' (symbol: two oysters) and 'The Rooster', a debating society. The Roosters favoured comical names for savouries such as 'roosters on horseback' or 'wizzard gizzards', but these alternated with conventional *diabes à cheval* and *coquilles au fromage*. Bump Suppers between 1920 and 1937 always included savouries in what were rather simple meals, usually of four courses only. A supper on 23 February 1935 began with whitebait, followed by roast ducks with potatoes and peas, a sweet course of *bombe Venitienne* and *croûtes de Lyon* to conclude.<sup>9</sup>

Although interwar dinners were less ostentatious than in the past – the days of a separate *relevé* and multiple-dish *entremêts* were over – feasts retained their earlier distinction and generally included a savoury course. The 1937 Commemoration dinner at St. Catherine's (Cambridge) began with oysters, offered thick and clear soups, sole, mutton, suckling pig, a Champagne sorbet, roast teal as a game course and after two sweets, two savouries: lobster pancakes and fines herbes toast.

### War and Post-War

144 War rationing put an end to luxury dining and as regulations limited how many courses could be served, the savoury almost everywhere disappeared. Exceptionally, boat race dinners at St. Catherine's, Cambridge, between 1941 and 1945 still included savouries – egg and anchovy *croûtes*, egg and kipper *croûtes* and stuffed tomatoes are examples.<sup>10</sup>

Records for festive meals at Magdalene College, Cambridge, show both the grim effect of the War on dining and the persistence of the savoury course.<sup>11</sup> The annual dinner in honour of Samuel Pepys in 1939 had eight courses with the same number of wines. The menu is accompanied by three apposite passages from Pepys' diaries. (See Figure 1.) The savoury here, 'aiguillettes de mer', is made with garfish, which has a narrow-pointed head.

Four years later, the 1943 Pepys commemoration offered only three courses, but the last was 'nabobs' which I take to be a vaguely Anglo-Indian savoury.

Magdalene College, Cambridge, was among the few plucky colleges that refused to allow the savoury to fade in the first post-war years. It offered surprisingly elaborate, five-course feasts for its patron saint's day and *croûtes* appeared in 1946, 1947 and 1949, haddock, Ivanhoe (haddock puréed with mushrooms) and Harlequin (multi-coloured) respectively. The 1945 Peckard Feast (in honour of an eighteenth-century Master of the College, later University Vice-Chancellor) included *croûtes* Ivanhoe; mushrooms Lucullus were presented in 1948.

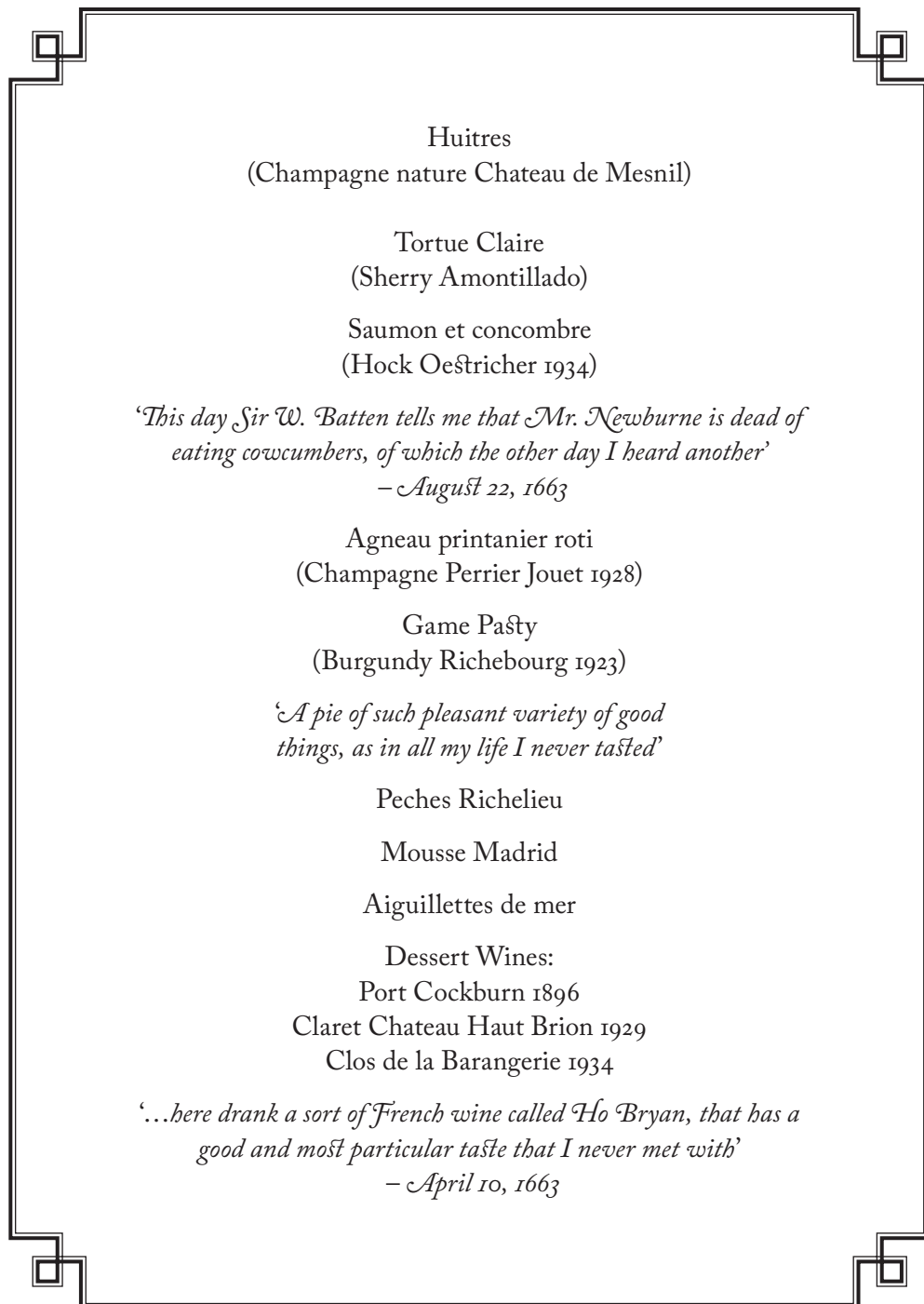


FIGURE 1. Facsimile of the menu from a dinner to honour Samuel Peys in 1939.

Most of the colleges whose menus I have examined revived the savoury by the mid-1950s. They differ as to when they abandoned the course, and there are a few that never quite gave it up.

The 1946 Christ Church Gaudy was meagre: clear turtle soup, roast chicken with peas and new potatoes, meringues with whipped cream, but there was a savoury of small salmon pastries. In 1947 there was a tomato hors d'oeuvre and a fish course of salmon trout meunière in addition to more-or-less the same line-up of turtle soup, chicken and meringue. The savoury was mushroom *croûtes*. The 1953 Gaudy was commemorated with six courses, including salmon and saddle of mutton, ending with a fried Parmesan pastries (*aigrettes de Parmesan*). Thereafter Censer's dinners and Gaudies include savouries such as mushroom *croûtes*, cauliflower au gratin, tartines and cassolettes. An Advent dinner in 1962 ended with cheese fondue; the Gaudy in 1967 with Stilton *croûtes* and a 1973 Censer's Dinner with *croûte Diane*. By the late 1970s, the savoury dies out. There was an attempt to revive it in the 1980s, but unsuccessfully.<sup>12</sup>

Hertford College too consistently favoured savouries on its Gaudy menus from the 1950s to the late 1970s. *Champignons Bordelaise* was nearly inevitable for Gaudy dinners at Hertford (the savoury usually preceded by *fraises Romaines* or *gâteau Hertford*). Regular meals also routinely included savouries. From 1950 until 1973 savouries alternated among several kinds of *croûte*, devilled lobster, cheese items, and something referred to as 'gondolas of haddock'.<sup>13</sup>

146

### Post-Postwar

What ended the era of the savoury was not post-war dearth but rather prosperity and the internationalization of British taste beginning in the late-1950s. The fact that meals during the Age of Austerity were skimpy and the slowness of the economic recovery meant that British food *tout court* became identified with impoverished artificiality – with canned soup, frozen *gâteau*, dollops of Marmite or HP Sauce, and cheery but not very inviting terms such as 'fry up'. Writers such as Rupert Croft-Cooke in his 1960 call to arms *English Cooking: A New Approach* bemoaned the nation's culinary mediocrity, imposed as it was by indifference, forgetfulness and tasteless affluence rather than by excusable dearth. They aimed to combat decline by restoring Britain's real food traditions. Croft-Cooke, however, was opposed to the savoury because it spoiled the appropriate pairing of wines.<sup>14</sup> An American writer Audrey Alley Gorton wrote, also in 1960, a cookbook with the spirited title *In Defense of British Cooking*. Unlike Croft-Cooke, she liked savouries, considering them typical and appropriate for her campaign and provided recipes for 13 classics, from caviar pancakes to cod's roe on toast.<sup>15</sup>

These were losing efforts, however, and for several decades after 1960, sophisticated dining was Continental, particularly Mediterranean. As we all know, it took a while for European standards of freshness, craftsmanship and terroir to be applied to Britain.

The savoury has experienced a modest revival recently, although it has lost its place in the order of courses, becoming an option that could be an hors d'oeuvre, a side dish or in lieu of dessert. At Cambridge, St. John's College still approximately once a week presents savouries such as devils on horseback, canapé Cadogan (oysters and spinach on fried bread with sauce Mornay), canapé Ivanhoe and Welsh rarebit.<sup>16</sup> Magdalene College, Cambridge, feasts have preserved savouries consistently since the end of the Second World War. They continue to appear in recent annual commemorations such as Pepys dinners and especially the feast in honour of St. Mary Magdalen, from haddock *sur croûtes* in 1946 to *anges à cheval* in 1969 and 1970 to sliced mushrooms on toast in 2013 and 2014.<sup>17</sup>

I hesitate to ask for savouries to be featured at future Oxford Food Symposium dinners, contenting myself with the hope that we will meet again over those wonderful collations, whatever their bills of fare.

### Acknowledgments

I have many people to thank for such a short communication, based as it is on several archives and libraries that required guidance to navigate. I would like to thank most warmly the following: For Somerville College, Dr Alice Prochaska, former Principal, and the Librarian Dr Anne Manuel. For the Cambridge colleges Trinity, Jesus and Gonville & Caius, I was greatly aided by Paul Aste, a student at Caius and archival intern there. At All Souls, Professor Julia Smith kindly introduced me to Dr Norma Aubertin-Potter, Clerk to the Archives of the Codrington Library. Peter Linehan, Fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, introduced me to the librarians and archivists of the College. Judith Curthoys, Archivist at Christ Church College helped me with that collection. Two former Yale students who subsequently studied in Britain, one at Oxford, the other at Cambridge, looked up material for me: Joshua Evans at Hertford College, Oxford, and Christina Stankey at Magdalene College, Cambridge. Finally my gratitude to Professor Nora Berend of St. Catherine's College, Cambridge, and Dr Colin Higgins, Librarian and Fellow of St. Catherine's.

147

### Notes

1. Mrs. de Salis [Harriet Anne Bainbridge de Salis], *Savouries à la Mode* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1877).
2. 'Lady Clutterbuck' [Catherine Dickens], *What Shall We Have For Dinner? Satisfactorily Answered for Numerous Bills of Fare for from Two to Eighteen Persons*, 2nd ed. (London, Bradbury & Evans, 1856), reprinted with an introduction by Susan M. Rossi-Wilcox, *Dinner for Dickens ...* (Totnes, Prospect Books, 2005), pp. 1, 18, 27, 37. See also Rossi-Wilcox, 'Saucing the Dish of Authenticity: Mrs. Charles Dickens's Menus and Her Husband's Writings', in *Authenticity in the Kitchen: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2005*, ed. Richard Hosking (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2006), pp. 368-378.
3. Mary L. Allen [also known as Macaire Allen], *Savouries and Sweets Suitable for Luncheons and Dinners* (London: J. S. Virtue and Co. Ltd., 1886), p. [ii].
4. George Augustus Sala, *The Thorough Good Cook: A Series of Chats on the Culinary Art and Nine Hundred Recipes* (London: Cassell and Co., 1885), pp. 43-44.



## The Savoury Course at Oxford and Cambridge Colleges

5. Oxford, Somerville College Archive. Unclassified.
6. Yann Morel, 'Le banquet à la cour de Bourgogne au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle: essai de définition', in *Le Banquet: Manger, boire et parler ensemble (XII<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles)*, ed. Bruno Laurioux et al. (Florence: Sismel, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2018), pp. 185-203; Thalia Brero, 'Soirées festives et vie nocturne à la cour de Savoie', pp. 229-259 in the same collection.
7. Cambridge, Trinity College Archive, Hall menus, May 22, 1884.
8. Oxford, All Souls College, Codrington Library, Undated Menu Book (datable to the 1870s or 1880s).
9. Cambridge, Jesus College Archives, Student Societies, 1905-1962, Series 4, JCCA/C5/4/6, Dinners and Events
10. Cambridge, St. Catherine's Archive, U/S/6/5, a total of seven menus from June 7, 1941 to March 4, 1944.
11. Cambridge, Magdalene College Archives, E/A/3, Box 1, folder 5, Pepys Dinner 1905-1993.
12. Oxford, Christ Church College Archives. The menus are kept in a section that includes information of Gaudies and other festive dinners. I thank Professor Carolyne Larrington, now at St. John's College, Oxford, for telling me about the failed attempt to revive savouries at Christ College.
13. Oxford, Hertford College Archive, menus.
14. Rupert Croft-Cooke, *English Cooking: A New Approach* (London: W. H. Allen, 1960), pp. 24-25, 189.
15. Audrey Alley Gorton, *In Defense of British Cooking: 200 Wonderful Recipes That Prove the English CAN Cook* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Greene Press, 1960), pp. 80-85.
16. I thank Mr. W. A. Brogan, kitchen manager at St. John's, referred by Dr. P. A. Linehan, Fellow of St. John's.
17. Magdalene College Archives, E/A/3, Box 1, folder 5, Pepys Dinners, 1905-1993; Box 3, folder 8, St. Mary Magdalene Feast, from 1935.