

Sex, Figs, Italics: A Visual History of Menus

Posted by *Dana Goodyear*

Food is sex you can talk about, a wise friend said recently. (In Seattle, where cake-baking is the new S. & M., food is also apparently sex you can't talk about.) And now that Taschen—of the deviant, beautiful, nostalgic books—has published a book called “Menu Design in America” (\$59.99), food is sex you can look at.

Menus, an introductory essay by the Jim Heimann says, are “an indicator of cuisine, a barometer of taste, and a highly sought piece of ephemera.” At nearly four hundred pages, the book itself is a monument, which begins its mostly visual chronicle with the rise of the restaurant in the mid-nineteenth century, carries through the onset of Prohibition—when the menus doubled as musical programs, featuring Chopin's Funeral March and Undertaker cocktails—on to the fat cartoon children depicted on the menus of the diner era, the Tiki theme, and the return to elegance (“*Mousse of Trout*” and side of nasturtium leaves at The Four Seasons; “La Quiche Lorraine” at L'Escoffier in Beverly Hills—a.k.a. “the West Coast White House,” due to President John F. Kennedy's frequent patronage).

So many naked ladies! Extruding champagne (French Casino, Chicago, 1935); in pom-pom shoes only (Super Grouper Dooper, 335th Bomb Group, Barksdale Field, Louisiana, c. 1944); astride a coquettish goldfish, plunging toward the ocean floor, hair streaming (Bimbo's 365 Club, San Francisco, 1963). The story ends with the rise of California cuisine—a romantic watercolor from Spago depicting “Roasted Sonoma baby lamb with lime pesto butter” and an Arts-and-Crafts-inspired menu* from Alice Waters's Chez Panisse, sensual as anything: a broad green fig leaf with two fat pendant fruits. Feminism!

*Patricia Curtan, the artist who made the figs, has come out with a book of her own, “Menus for Chez Panisse” (Princeton Architectural Press, \$40), more than a hundred exquisite letterpress menus, documenting dinners cooked for Julia Child, Wendell Berry, Merce Cunningham, and many New Year's Eves.