

Taking Sustenance, Then and Now

Inviting a Friend to Supper (1616)

Tonight, grave sir, both my poor house, and I
Do equally desire your company;
Not that we think us worthy such a guest,
But that your worth will dignify our feast
With those that come, whose grace may make that seem
Something, which else could hope for no esteem.
It is the fair acceptance, sir, creates
The entertainment perfect, not the cates.
Yet shall you have, to rectify your palate,
An olive, capers, or some better salad
Ushering the mutton; with a short-legged hen,
If we can get her, full of eggs, and then
Lemons, and wine for sauce; to these a cony
Is not to be despaired of, for our money;
And, though fowl now be scarce, yet there are clerks,
The sky not falling, think we may have larks.
I'll tell you of more, and lie, so you will come:
Of partridge, pheasant, woodcock, of which some
May yet be there, and godwit, if we can;
Knat, rail, and ruff too. Howsoe'er, my man
Shall read a piece of Virgil, Tacitus,
Livy, or of some better book to us,
Of which we'll speak our minds, amidst our meat;
And I'll profess no verses to repeat.
To this, if ought appear which I not know of,
That will the pastry, not my paper, show of.
Digestive cheese and fruit there sure will be;
But that which most doth take my Muse and me,
Is a pure cup of rich Canary wine,

Which is the Mermaid's now, but shall be mine;
 Of which had Horace, or Anacreon tasted,
 Their lives, as so their lines, till now had lasted.
 Tobacco, nectar, or the Thespian spring,
 Are all but Luther's beer to this I sing.
 Of this we will sup free, but moderately,
 And we will have no Pooley, or Parrot by,
 Nor shall our cups make any guilty men;
 But, at our parting we will be as when
 We innocently met. No simple word
 That shall be uttered at our mirthful board,
 Shall make us sad next morning or affright
 The liberty that we'll enjoy tonight.

Ben Jonson (1572-1637)

Lines on the Mermaid Tavern (1818)

Souls of Poets dead and gone,
 What Elysium have ye known,
 Happy field or mossy cavern,
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?
 Have ye tippled drink more fine
 Than mine host's Canary wine?
 Or are fruits of Paradise
 Sweeter than those dainty pies
 Of venison? O generous food!
 Drest as though bold Robin Hood
 Would, with his maid Marian,
 Sup and bowse from horn and can.

I have heard that on a day
 Mine host's sign-board flew away,
 Nobody knew whither, till
 An astrologer's old quill
 To a sheepskin gave the story,
 Said he saw you in your glory,
 Underneath a new old sign
 Sipping beverage divine,
 And pledging with contented smack
 The Mermaid in the Zodiac.

Souls of Poets dead and gone,
 What Elysium have ye known,
 Happy field or mossy cavern,
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?

John Keats (1795-1821)

From the Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám (1859)

A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!

With them the seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with my own hand wrought to make it grow:
And this was all the Harvest that I reap'd—
'T came like Water, and like Wind I go

Ah, fill the Cup - what boots it to repeat
How Time is slipping underneath our Feet:
Unborn TOMORROW, and dead YESTERDAY,
Why fret about them if TODAY be sweet!

But leave the Wise to wrangle, and with me
The Quarrel of the Universe let be:
And, in some corner of the Hubbub coucht,
Make Game of that which makes as much of Thee.

Edward Fitzgerald (1809-1883)

Tavern (1917)

I'll keep a little tavern
Below the high hill's crest,
Wherein all grey-eyed people
May set them down and rest.
There shall be plates a-plenty,
And mugs to melt the chill
Of all the grey-eyed people
Who happen up the hill.

There sound will sleep the traveller,
And dream his journey's end,
But I will rouse at midnight
The falling fire to tend.
Aye, 'tis a curious fancy—
But all the good I know
Was taught me out of two grey eyes
A long time ago.

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950)

Gumbo (2025)

It's multicultural, with forebears black,
white, Indian—the name, the sassafras,
crustaceans trapped beside a bayou shack,
hulled rice—respecting neither race nor class.

So many types! So many recipes!
A roux as thick as Mississippi silt,
or thin; dark brown or lighter, as you please.
It's healthy; we consume it without guilt.

Its proteins, veggies, and a bit of fat
(oil, lard, or butter) constitute a meal.
Fine restaurants, for the aristocrat
of dining, may add touches: shells reveal

a scallop, oyster, pearl; a pheasant breast
is featured elsewhere. But the plainest bowl—
small shrimp, wild duck, or ham scraps—may be best
for deepest flavor; likewise, for the soul.

Though not a chef, nor a gourmet, I know
well what I like, and why: no froth, no fluff,
in food, speech, friends; a trace, a cameo
at most. The genuine is quite enough.

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