



Dining with dynasties

EATING WITH EMPERORS By Jake Smith (Melbourne University Publishing, \$60)

IN Queen Victoria's day royal appetites were huge. Breakfast at Buckingham Palace consisted of five courses. For both lunch and dinner there were 10 to 12 courses, "plus side tables piled with roast beef, pigeon pie, tongue and hot and cold roasted chickens".

At regal banquets there would be up to 20 courses.

Queen Victoria had 45 kitchen staff. On the occasion of her diamond jubilee 24 additional chefs were brought in from France.

This book is a highly entertaining and informative tour of many royal houses of Europe, and particularly of the unstinted opulence of their kitchens.

Along with many pictures of royal persons, their elaborate menus are reproduced, and translated into English, and here and there a recipe in case you would like to try it.

For instance, how to stuff and cook a whole wild boar's head for Christmas Day (it should not be lightly attempted by the inexperienced, said Rene Roussin, chef-de-cuisine to George VI).

Tsar Nicholas II of Russia had 190 kitchen staff, but these were of little avail when he and his family had their last meal, of eggs and

bread provided by the local convent, before they were shot by revolutionaries.

Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany had 69 palaces, castles and hunting lodges. A hunter, he slaughtered 33,967 animals, not to mention thousands of pheasants, partridges and other birds.

By 1907 he had 40 cooks and up to 500 servants. His Berlin cellars held more than 200,000 bottles of wine.

This profligacy was echoed throughout European royalty, and there were a lot of them.

After its defeat in World War I, Germany "was awash with minor and quaint royal families of all sizes and descriptions, a jigsaw puzzle of independent kingdoms, grand duchies and principalities, each with its own court".

Game birds were always part of royal dinners, even tiny larks.

Another songbird eaten in France was the ortolan (now fortunately an illegal practice).

"To properly prepare the ortolan in the French tradition, the bird is first caught by net and left in a darkened box for a month, sometimes with its eyes poked out, to gorge itself on a diet of mixed berries, grapes and small insects. Once the bird is four times its original size it is drowned in armagnac and as the ortolan struggles for its last breath the alcohol is drawn into its lungs, where it complements the bird's delicious flesh."

If that's not off-putting enough for you, consider the words of Prince Henrik, husband of the Queen of Denmark, that he loves eating dogs.

"Dog meat," he said, "tastes like rabbit. Like dried baby goat. Or perhaps like veal."

Foie gras was always enjoyed by royalty.

"It is traditionally made from the livers of 12-week-old force-fed geese. The silky livers are produced by confining the goose and inserting a tube or funnel to force-feed it a paste made from maize. After two weeks the goose is slaughtered, by which time the liver should be bloated to just short of a kilogram." Prince Charles has banned foie gras from his royal menus.

You'll read here, by the way, that Prince Charles, after hunting or playing polo, "would have a boiled egg with Vegemite".

The food rationing of two world wars changed the unrestrained excesses of British royal dinners.

No longer the scenes of the early 1800s when George IV was crowned and offered his coronation guests 20 entrees, 22 main courses and 31 desserts.

In World War II the Queen Mother said, "While food is so short in this country we don't have any more food on the table at Buckingham Palace than is allowed to the ordinary householder."

— NOEL SHAW



No fine foods and wines for Adolf Hitler. Here a pot of home cooking rests on a side table as he dines with propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and others.