

the first person in America to slice potatoes lengthwise and fry them. So as well as being the author of the Declaration of Independence, he was also the father of the American French fry.

Part of the reason people could eat so well was that many foods that we now think of as delicacies were plentiful then. Lobsters bred in such abundance around Britain's coastline that they were fed to prisoners and orphans or ground up for fertilizer; servants sought written agreements from their employers that they would not be served lobster more than twice a week. Americans enjoyed even greater abundance. New York Harbor alone held half the world's oysters and yielded so much sturgeon that caviar was set out as a bar snack. (The idea was that salty food would lead people to drink more beer.) The size and variety of dishes and condiments on offer was almost breathtaking. One hotel in New York in 1867 had 145 dishes on the menu. A popular American recipe book of 1853, *Home Cookery*, casually mentions adding one hundred oysters to a pot of gumbo soup to 'enhance' it. Mrs Beeton provided no fewer than 135 recipes just for sauces.

Remarkably, Victorian appetites were really comparatively restrained. The golden age of gluttony was actually the eighteenth century. This was the age of John Bull, the most red-faced, overfed, coronary-ready icon ever created by any nation in the hope of impressing other nations. It is perhaps no coincidence that two of the fattest monarchs in British history did a great deal of their eating in the 1700s. The first was Queen Anne. Although paintings of Anne always tactfully make her look no more than a little fleshy, like one of Rubens's plump beauties, she was in fact jumbo-sized – 'exceedingly gross and corpulent' in the candid words of her former best friend the Duchess of Marlborough. Eventually Anne grew so stout that she could not go up and down stairs. A trapdoor had to be cut in the floor of her rooms at Windsor Castle through which she was lowered, jerkily and inelegantly, by means of pulleys and a hoist to the state rooms below. It must have been a most remarkable sight to behold. When she died, she was buried in a coffin that was 'almost square'. Even more famously enormous was the Prince Regent, the future George IV, whose stomach when let out



Royal appetites: even the astounding range and quantity of food on the menu (above) for the March 1850 banquet – guest of honour: Prince Albert – to celebrate the forthcoming Great Exhibition were cast into the shade by the gourmandizing of the previous century, practised not least by Queen Anne (opposite, painted by Edmund Lilly).