

# A Place Setting for Everything

By Matthew Gurewitsch

New York

*Thomas à Becket: Tonight you can do me the honor of christening my forks.*

*King Henry II: Forks?*

*Becket: Yes, from Florence. New little invention. It's for pronging meat and carrying it to the mouth. It saves you dirtying your fingers.*

*Henry: But then you dirty the fork.*

*Becket: Yes, but you can wash it.*

*Henry: You can wash your fingers. I don't see the point.*

—Jean Anouilh, "Becket, or God's Honor" (1958)

**F**eeding Desire: Design and the Tools of the Table, 1500-2005 speaks to the Becket in us, not to the Henry. For sophistication in implements few will have suspected we ever needed, the show simply takes the cake.

The cuisines of China, Korea and Japan, at their most exalted, rival any in the world in refinement, yet even the richest table there is set with little more than chopsticks and a few serving spoons. Behold what the West hath wrought: spoons expressly adapted for salt, for skimming errant tea leaves, for mixing sugar into the absinthe, for serving peas, for ice (though you might prefer the tongs, not to be confused with the tongs for the asparagus or the tongs for lumps of sugar); forks for bread, other forks for toasting bread, still other forks for hors d'oeuvres, oysters, scallops and—yes—cherries; not to mention scoops for tea, scoops for cheese, scoops for marrow, scoops for berries, and scoops for crumbs. And please don't overlook the aspic slicer (a silver crescent on a handle); the macaroni server (part comb, part claw); the little rake for prying kernels of corn from the cob; stirrers ("muddlers") for the hot chocolate (but nary a swizzle stick); crushers for citrus fruit; scissors for the grapes; a bonbon spade; and the saw and hatchet (either will do) for the ice cream.

Speaking of ice cream, "Feeding Desire" also features a facsimile of what scholars tell us is the first written American recipe for our national staple food.

## FEEDING DESIRE

Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum  
Through Oct. 29  
Exhibit then travels to Copia:  
The American Center for Wine, Food,  
and the Arts in Napa, Calif.,  
from Jan. 26 to April 30.

The original, at the Library of Congress, is written in the hand of Thomas Jefferson—the owner, so we are told, of the first recorded ice-cream freezer in the Colonies. The ingredients: "good cream" (two bottles), six egg yolks, half a pound of sugar, a stick of vanilla, and an unconscionable deal of slave labor. Our Founding Father had developed a taste for the dessert in France. The document is tentatively dated 1785-89. Around that time,

you will recall, the French were importing the recipe for democracy from over here.

Evolution, in dining as in biology, is a distinctly nonlinear affair. "Feeding Desire"—assembled by Sarah Coffin, curator of 17th- and 18th-century decorative arts; Ellen Lupton, curator of contemporary design; and Darra Goldstein, a food historian—for the most part dispenses with chronology, and wisely so. Glass, china and table linens put in an appearance, but the real story here is the natural history of cutlery, and the big picture emerges plainly enough.

A wall label on the knife begins at the beginning: "The primary domestic purpose of a knife is to cut." (For extra credit, class, name a secondary domestic use.) More helpfully, a companion panel on the spoon and the fork explains that "the spoon was one of the first utensils developed by humans for eating, and it is the one most people first learn to use."



**Mac accessory:** First there was the fork, but soon the West had many utensils, such as this 19th-century macaroni server.

whereas the fork is a comparatively recent invention: "One of the earliest accounts of fork use in Europe is of an eleventh-century Byzantine princess in Venice who used a fork to eat sticky candied fruit." It seems that her example caught on only in the late 15th century, and then to a limited extent. "It took nearly another two centuries for the fork to overcome associations from its shape with the Devil, courtesans, and decadent effeminacy, based on the enthusiasm of the effete French King Henri III, to be widely accepted north of Italy."

As Becket's exchange with another Henry suggests, flatware was once an aristocrat's prerogative. Innkeepers provided nothing in this line; well-heeled travelers carried their own. Of the show's 300-plus objects, many exemplify cutlery for the upper crust on the move. These personal items are hardly less precious than portable altarpieces, and the carrying cases many came with are themselves works of

art. The curious eye will note many functional peculiarities; the business end of one knife suggests a lesser cleaver. Most often, though, the principal interest is in the artistry of the handles. Many are in ivory, carved with exquisite fantasy into human, animal and purely ornamental forms. (This group amounts to an exhibition within the exhibition.)

No less lavish are the accoutrements produced en masse for princely tables. The stupendous panoply that dazzles the eye in the banquet rooms of certain Old World palaces is beyond the scale of this show, but never mind. (As a rule, when you've seen one place setting at an imperial table, you've seen them all.) "Feeding Desire" concentrates on the individual object or set of objects. None outshines an assemblage by Claude Lalanne, which mimics forms in nature, from twig and leaf to dragonfly wing and lobster claw. Embellishment shows up anywhere but in the blades of the knives, where it would compromise their function. Nothing matches, and stacking the pieces would be impossible. A higher-maintenance set of trinkets would be hard to picture.

For contrast, the show includes a cross section of disposable picnic sets plain and fancy, many of them small miracles of industrial efficiency. Also present and accounted for, in rather excessive numbers, are table utensils of a type we know all too well—from the sleek stainless Air France used to lay out on the Concorde to the disposable jelly-bean-color plasticware distributed today on Song. The lid of a Colombo yogurt container will interest those who have never come across the ingenious Spoon-in-a-Snap (some assembly required), and for serious nostalgia there's a wooden ice-cream spoon, laid like a Band Aid in its two-ply paper wrapper. (Remember hoping for one last sweet lick of dessert but getting the first harsh taste of nothing but wood, which lasted and lasted?)

Signage in the second of the show's two principal galleries suggests eight-count 'em, eight—approaches for looking at flatware. Those of a technological bent will enjoy seeing the stages by which a silver ingot is shaped into a fork or a spoon—a metamorphosis only slightly less miraculous than the one resulting in a butterfly. An assortment of children's items makes a great case for playing with your food. A section focusing on ergonomics negotiates a truce between science and fashion. And so on.

But "Feeding Desire" transcends this menu of ideas. Food for thought is incidental. The essential flavor here is romance: romance arising from sheer beauty, variety beyond need, and invention without limit. Most of it, alas or happily, conjures up ways of life that are lost and gone forever. The past is a foreign country, the novelist L.P. Hartley once noted. They do things differently there.

In the fast-food here-and-now we live in, efficiency is in the ascendant. Is that all bad? But imagine! An ice-cream hatchet...A fork for cherries...While as often as not, the likes of us are back to eating with our fingers, and lucky to find a paper napkin. Henry II would feel right at home.

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