Playing for One’s Supper¹

During one of the episodes of Cao Xueqin’s *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, an eighteenth-century masterpiece of Chinese literature, Grandmother Jia encounters a familiar problem: none of her grandchildren are having fun around the dinner table.² Although the New Year is at hand and all are prepared for festivities, the awkward presence of Jia Zheng, one of Grandmother Jia’s sons (and a strict and unforgiving father), deflates everyone’s mood. The grandchildren seated at the feast, intimidated by the presence of Jia Zheng, all fall silent, even those with a usually chatty disposition. Grandmother Jia, astutely alert to the situation, attempts to rush her son off to rest. Jia Zheng, however, is well aware of his mother’s strategy and thwarts her attempts to usher him out by saying:

Having to-day heard that your venerable ladyship had got up in here a large assortment of excellent riddles, on the occasion of the spring festival of lanterns, I too consequently prepared prizes, as well as a banquet, and came with the express purpose of joining the company; and why don’t you in some way confer a fraction of the fond love, which you cherish for your grandsons and granddaughters, upon me also, your son?³

Grandmother Chia responds bluntly, but with a smile: ‘When you’re here…they won’t venture to chat or laugh; and unless you go, you’ll really fill me with intense dejection!’ (782). However, she concedes his presence – with a price: ‘But if you feel inclined to guess conundrums, well, I’ll tell you one for you to solve; but if you don’t guess right, mind, you’ll be mulcted!’ (782)⁴ This elicits laughter from the pleased Jia Zheng, who readily agrees, and their riddling competition commences.

Yet it soon becomes clear that the dinnertime riddling competition is no competition at all. Jia Zheng already knows the
answer to the first riddle his mother recites, but ‘designedly made a few guesses at random,’ showing effort before ultimately stating the correct answer to claim his reward. In turn, Jia Zheng poses a riddle for his mother to solve. But the moment ‘he had done reciting it, he communicated the answer in an undertone to Pao-yü; and Pao-yü fathoming what his intention was, gently told his grandmother Jia’ (783).

Throughout the meal, as more riddles are posed by one diner to one other, the grandchildren slowly begin participating as well, offering riddles for Jia Zheng and Grandmother Jia to solve. They smile and laugh excitedly as the grown-ups succeed. Although Zheng eventually leaves the table, the awkwardness in the air has cleared. Grandmother Jia concludes: ‘Let us go and rest! for the next day is also a feast, and we must get up at an early hour; and to-morrow evening we can enjoy ourselves again!’ (790; emphasis added)

What have riddles done to the feasting Jia family? Rather than providing an intellectual challenge, they instead serve as opportunity and script for wide participation in dinnertime conversation. They enliven the meal by offering family members of all ages an opportunity to communicate, laugh, and enjoy themselves, despite the effect of Jia Zheng’s presence. In other words, the dinnertime riddling of the Jia family brings them together.

Although Cao Xueqin’s The Dream of the Red Chamber was written in mid-eighteenth-century China, riddles at dinner and during festive occasions are present throughout much of documented history. In China, riddling during the lantern festival – the occasion for the Jia family’s feast-accompanying riddles – goes back to at least the Six Dynasties period, spanning the third to sixth centuries. In Western culture, too, riddles appear at meals and other festive occasions since the Biblical story of Samson and the Philistines. In fact, the ancient Roman celebration of Saturnalia, a precursor to Christmas, also included riddles during the meal. Symphosius, an author of the late antique period, documents one hundred Latin riddles in Aenigmata, and declares in his ‘Preface’ that:
When Christmas [Saturni] time rounds out the waning year
And fills all hearts with merriment and cheer,
When stuffed with dinner and made gay with wine
You long amid the loosened tongues to shine;
...
Nor is it bad to wage a war of wits
And solve a riddle with the word that fits.6

The popularity of Symphosius’ riddles is evidenced by over thirty manuscripts that survive him. But why did Symphosius and his contemporaries want riddles to round out stuffed plates and glasses of wine? Although existing anywhere between nine-hundred and fourteen-hundred years before the author of The Dream of the Red Chamber, Symphosius, like Jia Zhang, fears awkward silences: ‘I hate to sit amid a company gay / And seem as if I’d nothing brought to say’ (11–12).

Clearly, then, riddles were popular fare at feasts and festivities. But if mealtime riddles have been around for thousands of years, where have they gone? One answer to that question lies inside a handwritten manuscript, hailing from a mansion in the Doncaster area of South Yorkshire in England. Tucked away in a drawer amidst cookery receipts, medicinal remedies, and other ephemera from the early 1800s, it bears a curious title: ‘An Enigmatic Bill of Fare.’

ENIGMATIC BILLS OF FARE

When, in the summer of 2018, McGill Library finalized the purchase of what came to be known as the ‘Doncaster Collection,’ we believed that we were acquiring cookbooks. These manuscripts contained over 1,300 culinary and medical receipts ranging from the 1780s to the 1850s. Within, however, and hidden away in a notebook attributed to Eliza Smithson from the early nineteenth century, was ‘The Enigmatic Bill of Fare.’ At first, it appeared to be a table setting diagram. But the names of the dishes were oddly surprising: they were all written in riddles.

This discovery prompted a research quest. We set out to understand what this curious menu was and where it came from.
Slowly, we began to acquire more examples of the phenomena, ranging from the late eighteenth to the mid nineteenth centuries. As we identified similar menus, an even more surprising question arose: why have they never been considered before?7

The subgenre of ‘Enigmatic Bills of Fare,’ often called ‘Enigmatical Dinners’ or ‘Intellectual Feasts,’ seems to first emerge in early eighteenth-century England. These menus are handwritten manuscripts that frequently appear, like the Enigmatic Bill of Fare in the Doncaster Collection, among other non-riddling recipes and medical remedies. The Enigmatic Bill of Fare featured below is the first known riddle menu of the period, dating from 1733.8

Little information about this practice survives. It is not entirely clear if these menus were given as invitations to guests or if they were placed on the table during meals to describe the dishes. Neither is it certain if the dishes represented were even served at
all. To further complicate the history of the Enigmatic Bill of Fare, some manuscripts suggest all – or none – of these possibilities.

However, the riddles themselves offer us glimpses of the kind of knowledge and skills required of dinner guests. For example, many of the riddles are word games and puns, playing on the wit and humour of those at the table. Phrases such as ‘Melancholy Soup with Crooked Sarah’ (‘Sal-Awry’ to produce ‘Celery’), ‘A Dutch Prince in a Pudding’ (‘Orange Pudding,’ with a nod to William of Orange), and ‘The Divine Part of Man Boiled’ (‘Stewed Sole’) all suggest the playful aspect of these dinners. And these riddles were probably designed to prompt appreciative laughter when solved (or not). Others, however, question guests’ general knowledge. ‘Part of the Zodiac Buttered’ (either ‘Crab’ or ‘Fish’) and ‘The Grand Seignor’s Dominions Larded’ (‘Turkey’) both suggest that the riddle solvers had to employ previous knowledge to understand the dishes at the table. This Enigmatic Bill of Fare also contains
a Biblical riddle, 'The First Temptation in a Small Blast of Wind' ('Apple Puff'), one of many that begin appearing as the tradition gains currency in England, and afterwards in North America. Although it is unclear where these cryptic menus originated or how they enriched those who employed them, these manuscripts slowly spread throughout England in the eighteenth century. On 10 January 1741, an identical menu to Elenor Poole's is featured in *The Publick Register or The Weekly Magazine*, a publication launched a week earlier by Robert Dodsley. Running for only 24 issues, the magazine hoped to reach 'the Learned and Ingenious,' with the intention of becoming 'a general Vehicle for the Literati of the whole Kingdom to communicate their Knowledge and converse with

![Image](Gale ID: Z2001239391)

**Figure 3.** The Publick Register or The Weekly Magazine, 10 January 1741.
each other." Consequently, the inclusion of the Enigmatic Bill of Fare in *The Publick Register*, in addition to the representation of vegetables and fruit served at the meal (‘Sorrowful Apples’ indicate the then exotic ‘Pineapples’), both suggest that the intended feasters were of the upper or aristocratic classes. To emphasize its intellectual magnitude, the Enigmatic Bill of Fare, here titled ‘An Ænigmatical Representation of a real Entertainment,’ was featured under the subsection ‘Poetical Essays.’ Such an intellectual section title both identifies the lofty aspirations of these riddling menus and also implies that the Enigmatic Bill of Fare was possibly not meant to be consumed at all – food for the mind rather than for the stomach.

Two years later, in 1743, the same Enigmatic Bill of Fare is printed in volume two of the fourth edition of *The Lady’s Companion: Or, An Infallible Guide To The Fair Sex.* This *Companion* had been initially published in 1737 as *The Whole Duty of a Woman; Or, An Infallible Guide To The Fair Sex* by the printer T. Read. The fourth edition is the first of the *Companions* to feature this puzzling menu (293–94), and it is also accompanied by another equally confusing menu called ‘An extraordinary Bill of Fare in the High Goût,’ with dishes such as ‘Fricasey of Frogs’ and ‘Couple of Roasted Hedge-Hogs.’ The fifth and sixth volumes of the *Companion*, published in 1751 and 1753 respectively, contain the same riddling menu. The headnote makes the companion’s purpose clear: to educate women about ‘good Housewifry, particularly Rules, and above Two Thousand different Receipts in every Kind of Cookery’ (vol. 1, 1). It is apparent that T. Read did not think of his audience as ‘the Learned and Ingenious,’ whom Robert Dodsley also addressed, and there is certainly no section within *The Lady’s Companion* titled ‘Poetical Essays.’ What does this difference suggest? The *Companion* features hundreds of menus between its pages, as well as thousands of dishes, all accompanied by preparation instructions. It would seem that, like the other bills of fare within, this riddling menu was to be served and consumed around the table, digested by the stomach in addition to the mind.
Although the multiple reprintings of the Enigmatic Bill of Fare over the course of ten years suggest its popularity, by 1755 the success of the riddling menu becomes readily apparent: it reaches the royal family, and a very similar cryptic menu is served at Christmas for King George II. Until 1755, the Enigmatic Bill of Fare remains largely unchanged, offering the same dishes in the same order, even boasting an identical page layout. In the ‘Bill of Fare for His Majesty’s Dinner on Christmas Day 1755,’ transcribed by India Mandelkern, however, new riddling dishes are introduced and some familiar dishes from the previous menus are revised. Descriptions become longer and the dishes more complex, befitting of their regal office. New plates such as ‘The House of a Bird with the Life and Death of a Calf, season’d with Lord Mayor’s pride and Welshman’s Delight, and garnished with an Old Woman of ninety’ and ‘The Sign of the going out of March divided with the Debtors Security, Sweet Wine, and the produce of a Walking Stick’ are served on Christmas day. An attempt at humour is preserved. On the following day, King George II apparently partook in some more familiar riddling meals. Dishes from ‘His Majesty’s Dinner on the Following Day’ include ‘The Grand Seignour’s Dominions roasted,’ ‘A Sign in the Zodiack butter’d,’ ‘The Conveyors of Venus roasted,’ and even ‘A Dutch princesses pudding’ – all riddles featured as early as 1733, within Elenor Poole’s cookbook. These manuscripts indicate the success of riddling dishes, which not only represent the King’s holiday dinners, but that these feasts were also enjoyed on two successive days. Imagine finishing a meal and raising a glass of ‘Counterfeit Agony’ to toast the King’s health (‘Cham-Pagne’). Laughter to ensue.

By 1772, the Enigmatic Bill of Fare filters into other publications, and becomes further popularized, adapted, and transformed into verse. The Ænigmatical Repository; Or, New Fund Of Amusement, For Young Ladies And Gentlemen by Charles Crinkum is a puzzle collection intended for ‘Young minds’ (i), and features two of ‘An Aenigmatical Entertainment, in Epistolary Verse.’ These stanzas offer both new and old dishes to be served and solved. As part of the first course, for example, Charles offers:
The title those doves, which (as poets declare)
Drew the chariot of Venus, do commonly bear;
Toss'd up in a high season'd soup may be seen
If you move off the lid of that cover'd tureen. (11)

The answer is probably ‘Pigeon (Soup),’ playing off the same quizzical question as ‘Venus’s Guides’ in Poole’s earlier manuscript. Similarly, in the second course, Charles presents a dish

Well roasted, behold the Grand Seignior’s domain!
Adorn’d like Lord Mayor with a mighty fine chain!
Made of sauce, and some periods descriptive of time,
To make up a dish most undoubtedly prime. (11)

Of course, the answer is ‘Turkey.’

Throughout the end of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century, more Enigmatic Bills of Fare appear in both manuscript and published form, and they incorporate other innovations. In a 1780s notebook titled a ‘Pleasing Variety for Miss Mary Arnold,’ compiled by a ‘Mrs. Stapleton,’ an Enigmatic Bill of Fare identical to that appearing in Poole’s notebook and *The Publick Register* is documented.17 Appearing among the pages of the notebook, however, are other riddling dishes; ‘A Dish of Fruit,’ for example, features both familiar and new riddles. In subsequent pages, a poetic invitation to a cryptic dinner is copied in elegant handwriting as well:

Be pleas'd on Adam’s mule to come
And dine with me I’ll be at home
Your Liquor shall be ten to one
The last part of the sound of Gun
Or to reversify[?] the treat
A drink where[?] Contradictions meet
Some Creatures that can undermine
Will serve you very well to dine
A joint you never before have found
A dish never[?] yet above the ground
Some animals whose bones are seen
Figure 4. ‘Pleasing Variety for Miss Mary Arnold’, The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles (MS.1987.001).
Where other Creatures have their skin
A Sallade which the Poor alas
Make windows of instead of Glass
What once Pythagoras forbad
A what made half a country mad
And at the bottom of a table
My Sweethearts leg if I am able
I’l add the Place mans best reward
And seasoning by the sun prepar’d
If you can guess from hints like these
Your fare take part of when you please

Although it is clear that this manuscript takes riddles from earlier Enigmatic Bills of Fare (such as ‘A Bottle of hilltop’ the answer to which is the Irish ‘Poitín,’ also known as ‘Mountain’), the invitation to dine also incorporates riddles, which distinguishes this example from those appearing in earlier manuscripts.

Innovations in print also begin appearing toward the end of the century. Between 1797 and 1800, three editions of The Masquerade were published, another reprinted collection featuring riddles, charades, and conundrums of all sorts. Yet, in the ‘Enigmatical Dinner’ published in these monographs, the riddles are almost all new.

Some dishes, such as VIII in the second course (the answer to which is ‘Plum tartlets’), reference previous menus (described as ‘Some hundred thousands’ in Poole’s manuscript). And yet, their riddling clues are different. In the first course, for example, the answer to dish X is ‘Pigeons broiled’; in the second course, plates I and VII are ‘Turkey’ and ‘Orange Pudding’ respectively; and the solution to dish I in the Dessert section is ‘Pineapple.’

As novel enigmatic menus begin appearing, the geography of their location expands. Enigmatic Bills of Fare seem to have first appeared in Ireland as early as 1774 in ‘An Enigmatical representation of a real entertainment’ (identical to Dodsley’s The Publick Register and bearing the same title). By 1790, this exact cryptic menu is published within Toby Broadgrin’s The Book of
ENIGMATIC DINNER.

FIRST COURSE.

I.
Two negatives resolved, with one between them—lax, and abet.

Remover.

II.
Half a hen-deck, half a veal—embellished—4/6ths of inwardly—what he does is what he dispells.

VII.
1/4th of a temptation—prodigious—3/6ths of virtue—2/3rd of a hundred.

A noble pair, 3/4ths of a limit—a small place curtailed.

VIII.
An inch a medical note—peculiar to the talkers.

IV.
2/6ths of name—2/6ths of bliss—half of the cause of godliness, a ceremony, and 3/6ths of formerly of a merry gait.

V.
A fat dog, what expedient often does a cogitation.

IX.
Half of a mack of ferret—scurried, half genuine—fifty, and bickleness.

Second Course.

V.
3/4ths of movement to unite—1/4th of an inch.

VII.
An emulsion of exercise, to move—half a lake, a snake, and 1/4th of a jewel.

IX.
3/4ths of a distributor, 1/4th of a fing—4/6ths of comfort, half a star, an aim —a nation, and pains.

XI.
Three, conducted—part—4/6ths of a lamb—half a fable, and so forth forward.

X.
A hundred thousand—leaves, and ob milestones.

III.
Half of a mack—oblique, and 1/10th of a half.

VIII.
Half of a mack of ferret—scurried, half genuine—fifty, and bickleness.

Dessert.

VI.
In verse, and part of an epic.

XII.
A bird, 1/3rd of an inch, to wander, me, and 1/8th of a convocation.

IX.
Times specified.

XI.
A bird, 1/3rd of an inch, to wander, me, and 1/8th of a convocation.

V.
3/4ths of a man—half of a lapping—4/6ths of a miner, half a case—half a mack—pool, and snows.

X.
A pack of bats—3/4ths of a mack—half a mack, and half a mack—half of a fatal—half of a fatal.

VII.
3/4ths of what is used in fusing, and half an English company.

VIII.
Half the form of a good woman, and 3/4ths of a plague.

IX.
Half an edifice, 2/5ths of a great church, and half an honest beagle.

X.
Half a lake, and a measure recorded, and plucked.

X.
Our half of harmony, and 3/4ths of unity.
Oddities and by 1812 is also featured in Thomas Tegg’s *The Spirit of Irish Wit.* Ultimately, the cryptic menu will travel across the Atlantic and change substantially. However, at the turn of the nineteenth century these menus—which were still confusingly mixed, appearing in both cookery companions and intellectual publications geared to challenge the mind rather than satisfy the body—acquire an additional purpose. They begin to claim space by virtue of just being fun.

SATIRE AND RIDDLING MEALS

Give him but food for laughter, and he would almost consider himself furnished with food and raiment. (259)

Within the doors of a Chop-house are to be found food for both body and soul—mortal and mental appetites—feasting for corporeal cravings and cravings intellectual—nourishment at once for the faculties both of mind and body: there, in fact, the brain may be invigorated, and the mind fed with good things; while the palate is satisfied by devouring a mutton chop, a veal cutlet, or a beef steak; and huge draughts of wisdom may be imbibed while drinking a bottle of soda or a pint of humble porter. (254)

On the front page of Tegg’s 1812 publication, in which ‘An Enigmatical representation of a real entertainment’ appears, the compiler declares that within his collection are various ‘Articles of Intellectual Confectionary, Adapted to the risibleMuscles [sic], and designed to dispel Care, Purge Melancholy, Cure the Spleen, and Raise the drooping Spirits in these gloomy Times.’ He was not alone in his desire to raise the spirit of the times. The end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century saw the rise of many prominent political and social satirists who used print publications to disseminate their humorous etchings.

Among these artists were Thomas Rowlandson and William Heath, both popular satirists in their day. It is not entirely clear how these humorous illustrators came to depict riddling dishes, but toward the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century a series of sketches begin appearing in *The Caricature Magazine,*
or, Hudibrastic Mirror. Both Heath and Rowlandson provided illustrations for this publication, and among their satirical representations was a series of etchings, each titled ‘A Bill of Fare for Bond Street Epicures.’ These caricatures were clearly meant to be parodic and grotesque depictions of women (presumably the courtesans of Bond Street). The publisher of this magazine was also Thomas Tegg, who had recently published *The Spirit of Irish Wit* in 1812, and which featured ‘An Enigmatical Representation of a Real Entertainment.’ Tegg had been born in England and moved around the British Isles in the late eighteenth century. By 1796, he found himself in London. There he went on to become one of the most successful publishers and book sellers in England.

By 1824 these satirical depictions of food were popular enough to deserve a folio edition. Thomas McLean, another successful printer of the period, publishes his *Good Dinners; Dress’d by W Heath and Served by Tho’ M’ Lean at his Hotel in the Haymarket,* a highly stylized edition featuring in-colour prints of characters represented as dishes. At first glance (and as indicated by the title),
this folio appears to be an intricate menu, featuring several dozens of meals, each engraved with an appropriate (or, in many cases, inappropriate) caricature.

Various foods are presented in Good Dinners, ranging from ‘French Rolls’ to ‘Fowl.’ Like Enigmatic Bills of Fare, they offer a riddle – albeit a humorous one – designed to provoke laughter when understood. In the depiction of ‘French Rolls’ two Frenchmen are rolling down the hill, while in the image for ‘Fowl’ a man appears to have eaten something exceptionally foul. Some images, such as the depictions of a tailor for ‘Cabbage’ and a man frustrated by women for ‘Spare Rib,’ are almost exact visual representations of riddles found in earlier cryptic menus.

Figure 7. ‘French Rolls’, from Good Dinners, courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal, QC (FOLIO-1298).

Figure 8. ‘Fowl’, from Good Dinners, courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal, QC (FOLIO-1298).
The title page suggests that the folio was intended as a hotel menu, but no such hotel or restaurant existed at Haymarket. Although these satirical bills of fare were also to be enjoyed around the dinner table, they offered entertainment rather than sustenance. Writing in 1866, John Murray describes the use of caricatures produced by S.W. Fores, who had also worked with Rowlandson:

He formed a sort of library of caricatures, and other prints, and charged for admission to look at them; and he afterwards adopted a system of lending them out in portfolios for evening parties, at which these portfolios of caricatures became a very fashionable amusement in the latter part of the last century.²⁸

Emerging as an intellectual and culinary tradition in the early eighteenth century, Enigmatic Bills of Fare evolve into an alternative form of entertainment by the early 1800s. Spurred by the rise in popular satire and taken up by successful publishers like Thomas Tegg who had experience with cryptic dinners, the

Figure 9. Good Dinners, Courtesy of Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library, Montreal, QC (FOLIO-1298).
riddling tradition evolves into a humorous practice as well as a puzzling one. Satires, parodies, and other laughter-inducing representations of food provided guests and readers amusement through the magazines of the period – from London to as far as Glasgow. Although changed in form and purpose, the satirical dishes of early nineteenth-century Britain take after their predecessors. S.W. Fores’ ‘library of caricatures’ (Murray 241) and the folio Good Dinners remain testaments to many evenings of laughter.

CROSSING THE ATLANTIC AND ADOPTING A NEW NAME

An invitation to all we now extend,
Our conundrum supper to attend.
Queer-titled viands we’ll serve Tuesday night.
And hope each one will taste all right.
Boiled roasted, and baked will these dainties be,
But named to test your ingenuity.
We’ll serve nothing odd–no, not even hash–
But familiar dainties we’ll give for cash.
In each queerly-named dish you’ll find a friend,
E’en though to detect it you’re at your wit’s end.
That you come to this supper–taste of each dish,
Our church ladies sincerely, cordially wish.

Every person is put in motion by a Newspaper. … It is a bill of fare, containing all the luxuries as well as necessaries, of life. Politics, for instance, are the roast beef of the times; essays, the plum pudding; and poetry the fritters, confections, custards, and all the et cetera [sic] of the table, usually denominated trifles. (213)

Elsewhere, however, a different food-related puzzle tradition was beginning to form. Alongside the rise of satirical foodways, cryptic menus had begun appearing in places far remote from England and Scotland, and these did not showcase satire. In 1802, The New England Quarterly Magazine publishes one of the earliest American enigmatic menus. Like the menu featured in Broadgrin’s and Tegg’s publications, this bill of fare is an exact replica of the first
enigmatic menu found in Elenor Poole’s notebook. It has travelled far from 1733 England.

Many of the early American Enigmatic Bills of Fare are replicas of eighteenth-century English manuscripts. However, multiple variations of the riddling menus arrive around the same period. In an 1808 cookbook owned by Sarah Yeates of Lancaster County Pennsylvania,33 a handwritten version of the same cryptic menu appears among the pages of other culinary and medicinal recipes.

Although almost identical to the Poole manuscript from the early eighteenth century, there are a few notable differences that suggest multiple source documents for the menu. First, the title of Yeates’ cryptic dinner is ‘An Enigmatic Bill of Fare,’ which follows the title of Poole’s menu and other like table settings rather

Figure 10. Sarah Yeates Cookbook, Landis Valley Village & Farm Museum, Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission (C2-4-3-D, FM.36.320 [247]).
than the publications that featured the same as ‘An Ænigmatic Representation of a Real Entertainment’ (including the *New England Quarterly Review*, published six years earlier). A second clue is the addition of ‘Counterfeit Agony’ to Yeates’ dinner, written are the bottom of the Liquors section. Although this riddle appears in Mandelkern’s transcription of King George II’s Christmas feast from 1755, it does not appear in Poole’s version, nor does the inclusion appear to be in the same hand of the rest of the Yeates manuscript. On a separate page, however, there is an ‘Explanation of the foregoing Bill of Fare,’ in which the second hand attempted solutions. Although this contributor did not succeed in solving all of the riddles, the answer to ‘Counterfeit Agony’ (Champagne) is among them.

By the 1820s, cryptic menus begin appearing in other publications and start featuring both old and new riddles together. In 1824, the first volume of *The Casket, Or, Flowers of Literature, Wit, and Sentiment* is published in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At first glance, the menu printed at the end of this volume seems familiar. ‘The divine part of Man,’ ‘The Grand Seignior’s

![Figure 11. The Casket, Or, Flowers of Literature, Wit, and Sentiment, vol. 1, 1824, p. 96.](image)
dominion,’ ‘A Dutch Prince,’ and ‘A sign in the Zodiac’ are all riddles that first appeared at cryptic dinners nearly one hundred years earlier. At second glance, however, a variety of new riddles are incorporated as well, some describing similar dishes while others are altogether new. This menu also adopts a distinctly American flavour: ‘What England never will be’ (‘Floating Island’). Other menus from the period also feature riddles such as ‘A Part of a River in Pennsylvania’ (the answer to which is ‘Brandy’; *Popular Pastimes for Field and Fireside*, 1867).

Throughout the nineteenth century, these menus spread across the country. Among other publications, this enigmatic table setting is reprinted in *Atkinson’s Casket* in 1831 (a revised version of *The Casket, Or, Flowers of Literature, Wit, and Sentiment*), and both old and new riddling menus appear in publications and newspapers from New York (1856), Massachusetts (1867), Kansas (1889), Wisconsin (1891), and Tennessee (1895).35 Although some of these Enigmatic Bills of Fare are entirely new, they still take their titles from the English cryptic dinners of the previous century: ‘An Enigmatical Feast,’ ‘An Enigmatical Bill of Fare,’ ‘The Intellectual Feast,’ and ‘An Enigmatical Dinner.’ By the 1880s, however, a
Shift in nomenclature begins to occur, as well as a change in the demographics of the diners and hosts of the events. An entirely new tradition develops from the Enigmatic Bills of Fare toward the end of the nineteenth century, and it bears a new name as well: ‘The Conundrum Supper.’

Conundrum Suppers, also called ‘Conundrum Socials’ or ‘Conundrum Teas,’ begin to appear in the late 1870s and early 1880s in the form of fundraising events. At first group gatherings...
filled with conundrum-themed forms of entertainment, these festivities rapidly begin to feature riddling menus by the early 1890s. As one commentator noted at the time: “I see that the latest social novelty in the East is the conundrum supper. ‘Gracious, do they have to give it up if they don’t guess it?’” Like Enigmatic Bills of Fare, these events have remained largely obscured from contemporary research into culinary traditions. However, our recent exploration of newspapers from late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century America reveals the extent of the popularity of Conundrum Suppers. These publications demonstrate that the niche practice of Enigmatic Bills of Fare in the United Kingdom gave birth to thousands of Conundrum Suppers all across the country.

Many Conundrum Supper menus feature riddles from American Enigmatic Bills of Fare of the nineteenth century, suggesting the American appropriation of English riddling dinners. The Conundrum Supper menu appearing in *The Elizabethtown Post* on 23 November 1893 features dishes that had appeared nearly thirty years earlier in *Popular Pastimes for Field and Fireside* such as ‘Occupant of the Ark’ (or ‘A Biped from Noah’s Ark,’ both of which are ‘Ham’) and ‘Woman’s Weapon’ (a derogatory joke to which the answer is ‘Tongue’). Other menus feature common riddles similar to those appearing in older Enigmatic Bills of Fare such as ‘Married People’ (called ‘Couples’ in former cryptic menus to mean ‘Pears’) and ‘An Oriental Country’ (recall the ‘Grand Seignior’s Dominions’ for ‘Turkey’).

Yet despite their close likeness in riddles and dishes, the Conundrum Supper evolves into quite a different form of entertainment from earlier Enigmatic Bills of Fare. Newspapers reveal that the vast majority of these events were hosted not by upper-class families, but rather by Churches, primarily the Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist denominations, as well as by other religious organizations such as The Ladies’ Aid and Helping Hand groups, literary societies, schools, and more. Their fundraising activities often helped raise money for church renovations, humanitarian aid, or community projects and events.
Despite the lack of contextual information about British Enigmatic Bills of Fare, newspapers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries illuminate Conundrum Suppers. A quote repeated across multiple newspapers but attributed to the Chicago Times-Herald describes the practice: ‘The plan is to serve a supper a la carte, presenting the bewildered guest with a menu card written in enigma. From this he must order at random – eating, of course, what is received – unless he is clever enough to guess some hidden viand.’

This advertisement makes clear that the Conundrum Supper does not neatly mirror the riddling dinners of the eighteenth century. Conundrum Suppers made little claim to intellectual practice, nor were they publicized as a strictly culinary tradition. Rather like the rising British satire at the turn of the nineteenth century, Conundrum Suppers emphasize entertainment: ‘It is great fun for the guests.’ What appears particularly enjoyable was the potential for hilarious error, as ‘It caused much amusement to guess out what one wanted, and many a person got rather a queer supper by his unlucky guesses.’ As the notice presented here notes, too:

Of course the guests order blindly from the card. All manner of laughable mistakes and surprises are sure to follow, for if a man choose ‘fragrant beans from Arabia’ he will be sure of good cup of coffee at least, but if he order ‘spring’s offering’ a glass of cold water only will be his luck.

Although Enigmatic Bills of Fare remained the same for nearly one hundred years, Conundrum Suppers espoused a great deal of variety. Most featured riddling menus, but some presented conundrums in other forms as well. On 31 August 1897, the Syracuse Daily Journal (Syracuse, NY) provided instructions for hosting a ‘Conundrum Supper Party’ by using games and riddles to help guests find their seating partners: ‘Colored cards are prepared for the gentlemen and white ones for the ladies. The first half of the quotation is written on the colored card and the remainder on a white one. … Now the gentlemen will seek out the ladies
Fun at Conundrum Suppers.

A clever woman has invented the conundrum supper for raising money for charitable ends. "It is great fun for the guests," she says, "and highly remunerative to the philanthropists."

The plan is to serve a supper à la carte, presenting the bewildered guest with a menu card written in enigma. From this he must order at random—of course, what he receives—unless he is clever enough to guess some hidden viand.


Of course the guests order blindly from the card. All manner of laughable mistakes and surprises are sure to follow, for if a man choose "fragrant beans from Arabia" he will be sure of a good cup of coffee at least, but if he order "spring’s offering" a glass of cold water only will be his luck. "Herald of the dawn" stands for a bird.

Choose "confused and mixed." You will receive a generous dish of pickles. "Women of grit" will bring forth a couple of delicious sandwiches. "Wood from a celebrated watering place," when simmered down, amounts to "Saratoga chips." "Pearl gatherings" stand for oysters on ice. "Boston’s overthrow" means a cup of tea. "Cara fruits" are sugar plums. "Klondike nuggets" will bring different varieties of ices. "One who embarked from the ark" will furnish (cold boiled) ham. And these are but a few of the puzzles that ten minutes’ thought will suggest.

Each dish is paid for at its regulations restaurant value, so that the end of the affair means a goodish little sum in the hands of the philanthropists, and yet each guest has received his money’s worth.—Chicago Times-Herald.
whose cards contain the finishing words of the quotation begun on theirs.’ In another event featured in *The Malone Farmer*, ‘Place cards were used having on each a conundrum which had to be answered before the supper was served.’ 43 Many suppers also had a musical program, occasionally hosting riddle-themed music. 44

Some Conundrum Suppers were also themed events. On 4 March 1898, *The Goodland Republic* (Goodland, KS) advertised a ‘Shakespeare Luncheon’ hosted by ‘the ladies of the Christian church’ in Goodland, Kansas. The published menu uses Shakespeare quotes to present the dishes, which range from ‘Here’s a fowl without a feather’ to ‘Can you eat roots?’ Other

*Figure 15.* The Goodland Republic, Goodland (KS), 4 March 1898.
literary-themed conundrum dinners appear throughout the 1890s and the early twentieth century, often hosted by literary societies such as the ‘Social Purity Band and Literary Club,’ the ‘St. James Amateur Dramatic and Literary Society,’ and the ‘Warwick Road Literary and Debating Society.’

Occasionally, hosts of riddling suppers used other forms of entertainment to keep their guests occupied. Costumes could be requested ‘such as Martha Washington might have worn,’ and guests frequently competed with others for prizes or recognition. Often, hosts would innovate, creating unique riddling menus for the occasion. *The Gilboa Monitor* (Gilboa, NY) published on 7 October 1897 features a menu in which all the riddles begin only with the letter ‘c,’ while other unique events presented ‘Chemistry’ menus, introducing dishes such as ‘H2O Lacteal Facts at 0 Degree Centigrade’ (otherwise known as ‘ice cream’). Like Symphosius, who lived over one thousand years earlier, hosts revealed their motivation in print: ‘I can assure you there was no lack of conversation.’

Conundrum Suppers remained fashionable for about thirty years. Although they begin appearing rapidly in the 1890s—peaking in 1892 with over 150 yearly events documented across the United States—they are already on the decline by the 1910s and 1920s. Following the Saturnalia tradition, riddling dinners were significantly more popular during the holiday season, in particular during the late autumn, winter months, and early spring, particularly on holidays such as Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. In Canada, too, Conundrum Suppers begin appearing as early as 1893 and were still hosted as late as 1936 on both coasts. Although the tradition of British enigmatic dinners all but disappears from print publications in the mid-nineteenth century, riddling events also resurface in England in the 1890s. Now influenced by the American suppers flourishing across the pond, these are now presented as ‘Conundrum Socials’ and ‘Conundrum Suppers,’ and are hosted for fundraising purposes as well.

With the onset of World War I and the subsequent Depression era, Conundrum Suppers feature less and less in the newspapers.
of the period. Across the United States, almost half of all documented riddling dinners occurred between 1890 and 1900 (approximately 560 events), marking the 1890s as the most popular decade for Conundrum Suppers. Newspaper archives reveal around 300 publicized dinners from the 1900s, with only 150 found in the following decade. Events appearing in the 1930s and later are scattered but are still occasionally featured in publications until at least the 1970s. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we have found and documented almost 1,200 Conundrum Suppers. However, this number represents merely part of the story. Although our research has been extensive, it has focused primarily on digitized newspaper archives and inevitably excluded archives that are inaccessible online. There is a high probability, too, that many Conundrum Suppers were not advertised at all. The Conundrum Supper menu featured here, purchased by Nathalie Cooke and held by McGill University Library, recounts an event hosted in Pennsylvania on 1 February
1893. We have yet to find a correlating newspaper advertisement; likely, there are many more similar stories.

CONCLUSION AND MODERN FOOD RIDDLES

Few today are aware of the extensive mutual history of riddles and food. From Sampson’s riddle to the Philistines to Symphosius’ *Aenigmata*, from the royal dining table of Cao Xueqin’s *The Dream of the Red Chamber* to American Protestant churches of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, riddles have frequented dinners for thousands of years. Whether in the form of intellectual banter, prize-winning competitions, or merely as a way to have fun – riddles and food have caused people to sit down and engage in lively conversation.

Despite their apparent absence from modern dining practices, riddles remain embedded in culinary culture. Speakeasies, for example, which grew popular in the Depression years of the 1920s and 1930s, employed riddles, mysteries, and enigmas to help consolidate illegal drinking communities. These venues not only created places for people to gather and chat, but they also offered multi-marginalized groups spaces to claim and in which to flourish.

The renewed interest in cocktail culture and the return of Speakeasies in the twenty-first century have also brought back riddling as a form of entertainment. Bars and bistros such as Suite 114 in Toronto, Canada and the Mad Hatter in Oxford, England, both demand clients answer a riddle before entering, the latter declaring in all capital letters: ‘NO RIDDLE NO ENTRY.’ Others, like the AnonymouS Bar in Prague, Czech Republic, feature secret menus that only discerning and inquisitive guests will uncover. Many similar venues shroud even their physical location in an enigma. A guest might only enter a bar or restaurant by walking through the door of a Smeg refrigerator or by finding a secret four-digit code.

Even in the midst of a global pandemic, riddles and food continue to work together to both baffle and entertain. In May 2020, the Michelin 3-Star restaurant Alinea, located in
Chicago, decided to celebrate its 15-year anniversary with a conundrum event. Nick Kokonas, co-owner of Alinea, stated in an announcement: ‘Since we cannot party together, we decided … to create a provocation for your brain to ponder during the month of May. Why? Just for fun … and a bit of intrigue.’ Partnering with Sandy Weisz’ Mystery League, Alinea posed a competition of nine puzzles, leading the dedicated winners to a variety of potential prizes. Sound familiar?

Although *The Riddle Project* has been extensively researching related manuscripts, we have only accessed the very tip of the proverbial iceberg. With the help of new computational tools and digital databases, many more riddling foodways of the past three hundred years can now be excavated. Over the course of our research quest, some related riddling traditions have come to light. Scripture Cakes, for example, were popular American recipes that used Biblical verse instead of ingredient names to teach both culinary practices and scripture. *Assiettes Parlantes*, French ceramic plates from the nineteenth century, also employed riddles for entertainment and intellectual stimulation.

The popularity and variety of riddling meal events suggest that there are still other practices left to explore. Although each tradition poses a different riddle for culinary and history enthusiasts, they also display a mutual commonality: by providing us with moments of laughter and hearty conversation, they have continuously brought people together. Despite the surprising evolution of riddling dinners between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, their cross-Atlantic migration, and their unexpected diversity, riddling foodways have never truly left the dining table. What remains is for us to keep rediscovering them, to enrich our mealtimes with their charms, and, like Symphosius, to continuously ensure that ‘the talk goes round from side to side’ (Symphosius, ‘Preface’ 7).
NOTES

1. This article draws on research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and openly disseminated on GitHub. See https://riddleproject.github.io/. Many research assistants and library staff members have contributed to bring this project to fruition. We would like to extend thanks to Nora Shaalan, Chelsea Woodhouse, Andrea Wahba, Nathan Drezner, Owen Lewis, Will Keefe-Stacey, Chris Ciafro, and Tomas Corey for all their work. We would also like to thank Hannah Deskin and Greg Houston of McGill University Library for their able assistance with project needs. Finally, we would like to thank the staff of Gale (a Cengage Company) for their support and development of the Gale Digital Scholar Lab, which has proven to be an indispensable tool and database for our project.

2. The terms ‘dinner’ and ‘supper’ held different meanings in previous centuries. Until nineteenth-century England, ‘dinner’ was considered a late morning or midday meal, and ‘supper’ was understood as the final meal of the day. Riddling menus, however, often use their own terminology. Some are titled ‘Enigmatic Dinners’ while others ‘Conundrum Suppers’ – and it is not always clear at what times these meals were hosted. Their history also spans over two-hundred years and two continents, from early eighteenth-century England to early twentieth-century America. As a result, we have opted for a loose definition of these terms. For more information, see Vogler, Pen, Scoff: A History of Food and Class in Britain, Atlantic Books, 2020, esp. pp. 16–17, 32–33, 55, 75.


4. That is, Jia Zheng will be forced to forfeit some money.


8. Poole, Elenor and John Cobb, Cookery Book, 1733–1827 (held by The William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, MS.2003.001). This manuscript is attributed to Elenor Poole, with additional recipes added by John Cobb between 1733–1735. Although these people have yet to be identified, it is possible that Elenor Poole is Elenor (Hayden) Cobb of Poole, who lived with her husband James Cobb (married 1706) in Poole, Dorset. Their son, John Cobb, was born 1708 or 1709. See the OPC Dorset Project for more information: http://www.opcdorset.org/PooleFiles/PooleStJamesBaps1685-1721.htm; https://www.opcdorset.org/PooleFiles/PooleMarriages1685-1721.htm; http://www.opcdorset.org/PooleFiles/PooleStJamesBurs1740-1765.htm.

9. ‘Arts and Culture’, Publick Register or The Weekly Magazine, 1741. Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection,


14. The ‘Ænigmatical Bill of Fare’ appearing in the pages of this publication has been previously featured in Petits Propos Culinaires 15, November 1983. Within, a prize of £100 worth of books was offered to ‘the reader who sends in the most illuminating explanation of both the existence and the content of the OENIGMATIC MENU’ (81).

15. All references to the riddling menus served for King George II are to India Mandelkern’s blog and transcription, featured in http://homogastronomicus.blogspot.com/2011/05/the-kings-feast.html.


21. Broadgrin, Toby, The Book of Oddities…. Printed by Peter Hoey, at the


27. Heath, William, *Good Dinners…*. Published by Thomas McLean, 26 Haymarket, London, 1824 (held by McGill University Library Rare Books and Special Collections, FOLIO-1298).


33. *Sarah Yeates Cookbook*, ca. 1808 (held by Landis Valley Village & Farm Museum, C2-4-3-D, FM.36.320 [247]).


36. The earliest event we have identified appears in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Chicago (IL), 1 June 1878.


38. Examples for these riddles may be found in the newspapers *The Evening Gazette*, Port Jervis (NY), 23 May 1923, and *The Aegis & Intelligence*, Baltimore (MD), 16 December 1892 respectively.
40. Ibid.
42. *Ithaca Daily Journal*, Ithaca (NY), 28 September 1898.
44. See the *Cortland Standard*, Cortland (NY), 6 January 1893 for a ‘Conundrum song’ musical score.
45. See, for example, the menu published in *The Daily Morning Journal and Courier*, New Haven (CT), 21 February 1898 for dishes using quotes by Christopher Marlowe and Alexander Pope.
46. See, for example, *The Brookfield Courier*, Brookfield (NY), 6 November 1918, in which guests competed for the title of the most poorly dressed person present.
47. *Courier and Freeman*, Potsdam (NY), 20 December 1911.
49. For a visual representation of this data, see: https://riddleproject.github.io/maps.html.
50. See, for example, the *Leigh Chronicle and Weekly District Advertiser*, Leigh (Lancashire), 11 November 1909.
51. These numbers are approximations. For complete data, visit our online exhibition https://riddleproject.github.io/maps.html.
54. See more examples on *SquareMeal*: https://www.squaremeal.co.uk/restaurants/best-for/best-speakeasy-london_9356.
56. See the riddles and winners of this competition at: https://www.pilcrow.bar/about.