

DINING



LEFT: Tea in the dining room at Chartwell, August 29, 1927. Seated surrounding Churchill are (from left): painter Walter Sickert's wife, Therese, Diana Mitford, Eddie Marsh, "Prof" Lindeman, Randolph Churchill, Diana Churchill, Clementine Churchill, and Walter Sickert himself. Churchill later created a haunting painting from this photograph, which was taken by Donald Ferguson, who served as Private Secretary to a succession of Chancellors of the Exchequer throughout the 1920s.

ABOVE: One of a set of crested pewter table mats that were used every day at Chartwell.



"The cook is going," Churchill wrote to Clementine in March 1935. "She sent in her spoon and ladle on her own account. I am very glad. She had the knack to the highest degree of making all food taste the same, and not particularly good. I subsist on soup . . ."

Churchill's tastes were fairly well established. In soup: only clear broths ("it must be limpid") or petite marmite. In seafood: oysters and caviar, lobster and dressed crab, scampi, Dover sole and trout. Meats: roast beef, shoulder of lamb, and foie gras. Pudding: Yorkshire. Cheese: Gruyère. Dessert: chocolate éclairs.

Churchill's creative method was at bottom gastronomically social, with Chartwell's dining table his living laboratory. On Friday nights after dinner, he often read to his weekend guests sections of his latest

speeches in progress, paragraph by paragraph. "Wearing his carpet slippers he would pace up and down and then go into a corner and mumble alternative phrases to himself," one such guest, Patrick Donner, later recalled to Sir Martin Gilbert. "Then he would produce an improved paragraph, summon a secretary who would take it down, go out with it and then bring it back retyped. He would read it out again and ask us if we agreed . . . He would adjust the paragraph accordingly. That was part of his greatness and his charm," noted Donner, "the continuous adjustment to new facts or to new information . . . You could not have had a more elastic mind, or a more unbiased mind. He was always adjusting to the truth."

On June 18, 1942, with the flying boat carrying him to Washington about four hours away from landing, Churchill announced to Tommy Thompson, "It is nearly eight o'clock, Tommy. Where's dinner?" Thompson explained that it was only about 4:30 PM Eastern Standard time and that Churchill would be dining, upon landing, at the British Embassy. "I do not go by sun time . . ." Churchill retorted, "I go by tummy time, and I want my dinner."

Dinner was immediately served to him onboard. The flying boat soon landed on the Potomac River and Churchill was driven directly to the British Embassy, where he happily consumed a second full meal.

Churchill's singular capacity for food, alcohol, and dinner conversation was tested to its limits in 1942 when Stalin, having turned on his guest viciously during their final official meeting in Moscow, agreed at the last minute to see Churchill just once more before he departed. After an hour's talk, Stalin unexpectedly invited Churchill back to his own apartment for drinks. A six-hour dinner ensued, from 8:30 PM until 2:30 the next morning, all apparently improvised on the spur of the moment. "Gradually more and more food arrived," Churchill would recall. "We pecked and picked, as seemed to be the Russian fashion, at a long succession of choice dishes, and sipped a variety of excellent wines." Churchill's stamina at the dining table proved in this instance a saving grace. By the night's end, he and Stalin were friends again.



Churchill celebrates his 69th Birthday during the Teheran Conference dining with Roosevelt and Stalin at the British Embassy, November 30, 1943.