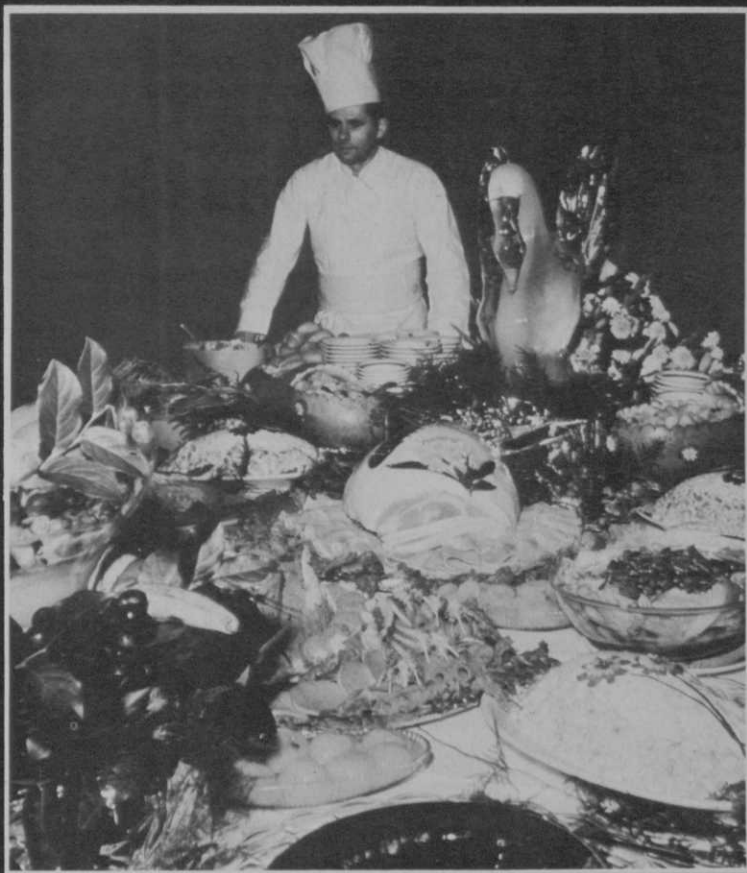


Food Prices:



What's Ahead in '73?

It looks as if there will be no real let-up in the upward pressure on food prices during at least the first half of 1973, and perhaps throughout the remaining year.

Planning clubhouse menus, from simple sandwiches to elaborate evening spreads and special nights, will be a headache, particularly for the manager under pressure to keep costs and menu prices down.

And there is also this factor—experts are confused by present day food buying patterns. Consumers go on griping about higher food prices, but they go on buying high-priced cuts of meat, convenience foods and the like. But will this attitude spill over into dining out? No one seems to know.

Says one food and beverage expert:

"I'm afraid diners are getting

Club managers will find it harder than ever to keep food costs down and dining members from complaining

by WILLIAM LOOMIS

more and more hostile toward continually increasing menu prices. This is especially true for those who seldom go out. They have a favorite meal one night, come back three months later and everything is a quarter more, and they get sore as hell. At home they blame the store for higher prices, or the economy, but they go on shopping there. They walk out of the restaurant, club or whatever and feel the place has gouged them. It's a tough situation

to try to cope with."

This is far from an uncommon sentiment. But professional food people are going to have to live with it for some time, it looks like. Here's how food prices on some major items are shaping up for the coming year.

Certainly, the biggest single worry for anyone involved in running a restaurant or pricing a menu is beef prices. Experts in the Agriculture Department see no let up in beef price increases. There just doesn't seem to be enough of this popular "protein to go around."

Some pressure by the Government may be put on meat processors to help hold down wholesale prices. There are signs that there will be more cattle coming to market in the next several months, at least that is what the Government experts

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hope the farmers will be doing.

But consider this problem: It looks as if there will be an effective ban on DES, a chemical that has been used to fatten cattle. Research reveals that the chemical has been causing cancer on some laboratory rats. If DES is banned, experts say it will take longer to fatten cattle for market. This in turn means the farmer has more invested in a head of cattle and this could mean higher prices meat packers must pay and that means price hikes all along the line and into the dining room.

Another worrisome development: Hog production has been going down significantly, which means that prices of pork products are going to be rising, perhaps even faster than beef prices. Experts advise that in those sections of the country where ham and pork cuts often run a good race against beef in many restaurants price hikes may complicate planning.

Warns one Government expert:

"The club barbecue isn't going to be a cheap night out much longer if the rise in pork prices doesn't slow down fast. And I can't see it happening. It looks like hog farmers want to get cut in on some of the gains beef has been bringing."

A brighter spot is poultry. Chicken, ducks, turkeys and the like remain plentiful. The outlook for the coming year suggests that they will continue to sell at about today's prices. But some experts warn that this may not be all that helpful in restaurants. If the home shopper buys more and more poultry, as may be the case, eating out may not be the time to eat more poultry, no matter how appetizing duck with black cherries and the like may be. It is generally agreed by some planners that this will be a tough area for restaurant management to gauge.

Another note of optimism. Recent rises in fish prices should be slowing. However, most of the stability will probably be in ocean fish. Lobsters remain a luxury item. Clams and oysters will vary greatly by location. Soft clams the frying kind, will be probably almost non-existent in many parts of the country. Maryland's Chesapeake Bay, largest supplier of soft

clams on the East Coast, lost 90 per cent of its clam beds during Hurricane Agnes.

Turning to vegetables, the Agriculture Department doubts there will be any important decline in prices. Biggest gainers are likely to be fresh vegetables, potatoes and non-citrus fruits.

It looks as if there will be a let up in price hikes on food fats and oils after record increases during the past year. This should hold down food preparation costs, butter prices and the like. Also desserts may not have to be priced dramatically higher if the Government's predictions hold that costs of sugar, other sweets and cereal and bakery products will advance only moderately above last year.

Another major food headache in the coming year will be the purchase and pricing of wines. Americans go on drinking more and more wine year after year.

At the same time, both foreign and domestic wines continue to skyrocket in price. French wines will continue to go up in the year ahead, but perhaps more slowly than the phenomenal pace of the last few years. United States wine prices are on the rise, because the demand is just too much greater than the supply. New acreages, especially in California, are being planted to catch up with demand, but that takes years. Meanwhile the cost of producing American wines continues to rise.

Experts advise that the time may be at hand when wines from other countries may offer a good solution. Wine merchants, liquor wholesalers and big importers and suppliers are studying new wine producing regions of the world. Those in the know advise that this may be a good time for a club manager or his beverage man to look into what is happening around the world in wine production and the prospects of finding high-quality substitutes for wines that are either too high or simply not available.

What all this means is that the coming year is going to be a difficult time for those who must plan ways to feed club members what they want and keep them from griping too much about the cost. □