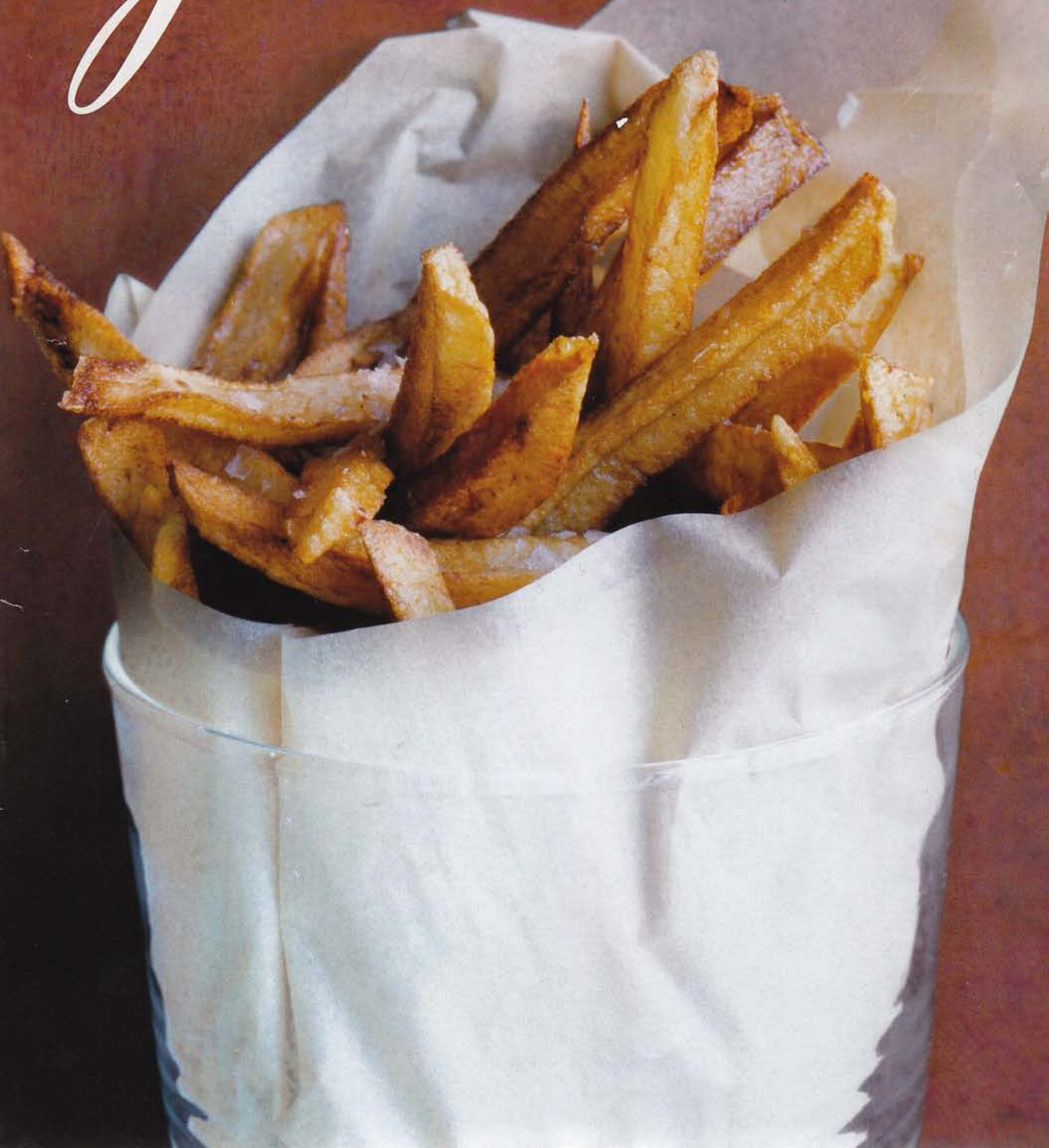


Gourmet

THE MAGAZINE OF GOOD LIVING





Comfort food invades Manhattan: Souped-up grilled cheese at the Mandarin Oriental.

HOTELS

THE FIVE-STAR SANDWICH

You'd think it was the economy that has hotels adding comfort food to their menus faster than the Dow can drop—a meltdown on toast for the Big Meltdown. However, the truth is, classic dishes have simply left the deluxe suite to star in the dining room. "Our company decided years ago to do grilled cheese, potpie, and mac and cheese for room service at Fairmonts all across the country," says Laurent Poulain, executive chef at The Fairmont Copley Plaza, in Boston. "I learned to make meatloaf at The Ritz-Carlton, in St. Louis, in 1991." Blame it on Thomas Keller, perhaps, whose grilled Cheddar sandwich from the late-'90s *French Laundry Cookbook* might have paved the way for hotels to embrace the kind of food everybody really wanted but was afraid to ask for. After a ten-hour flight, or a ten-hour meeting, or when you can barely scrape yourself off the floor to get to the table, who wants haute anything?

Of course, you don't have to be jet-lagged to need an infusion of coddling. You don't even have to be staying at the hotel, as a colleague and I proved by snagging an after-work sampler at the sky-high Mandarin Oriental, in New York, whose Lobby Lounge sits at the top of the Time Warner Center, 31 stories above Keller's own Per Se restaurant. In this glass-enclosed spaceship hovering over Central Park, I ordered the grilled cheese with tomato soup. The sandwich came as five pieces of toast, held together by molten Polder Blanc, and reminded me of a short stack of fish sticks that somehow forgot to separate. I peeled the sandwich apart for a dainty ritual that let me savor the lovely essence of truffle in each bite of warm, soothing cheese. The tangy orange soup sat nearby in a demitasse with a pinkie-lifting sort of handle. The \$18 ensemble may have been comforting, but it didn't exactly fill me up. Fortunately, a trio of mini-burgers was already heading our way. Clearly, comfort food at fancy hotels is no recession-buster dreamed up by number crunchers late last year. But more eye-opening: The iconic sandwich might not even be American at all. "The grilled cheese, ha," says Poulain. "Did you ever hear of *croque-monsieur*?" —William Sertl

MENU

USE YOUR NOODLE

No dish gets fiddled with more than lowly macaroni and cheese. And, contrary to legend, your mother did not invent it. That honor, according to Craig LaBan, restaurant critic for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, belongs to Louis Fresnaye, a French chef who was the first to document the pasta concoction in Philadelphia in 1802. Today, some hotel variations are fit for a king, or even Hollywood royalty. Here, a hit parade.

CLASSIC

The popularity of cheesy elbows baked en *casseroles* is sweeping the country, from Boston's Renaissance Waterfront Hotel to Fix, at the high-flying Bellagio, in Las Vegas. But the dish is now made with the likes of Fontina or mozzarella, not with the workaday Cheddar or American we all know and love. Asking price: about \$11.

WITH LOBSTER

What may have begun as a joke on the bourgeoisie—or as a remix of lobster Thermidor—has taken hold, from L.A. (at the Four Seasons) all the way to the Gulf Coast (The Ritz-Carlton, New Orleans), commanding prices as high as \$17.

WITH CRAB

Since lobster is a winner, smart chefs figured that crab would have legs (sorry). At the Hyatt at Olive 8, in Seattle, for example, the kitchen uses local Dungeness crab in its \$14 entrée.

WITH HAM

Before you dismiss this \$10 version as "basic," consider the fact that it's from Eric Ripert. It's served, however, at his 10 Arts restaurant in The Ritz-Carlton, Philadelphia, not at Le Bernardin, his signature temple of gastronomy in Manhattan.

WITH TRUFFLES

Well, truffle-scented, anyway. And upping the cheese ante, The Langham, Boston throws Taylor Gouda and Woodcock Timberdoodle—not a crossbreed of dog but a cow's-and-sheep's-milk combination from Vermont—into its \$10 dish. —W.S.

ADDRESS BOOK

- BELLAGIO** Las Vegas (bellagio.com) **THE FAIRMONT COPLEY PLAZA** Boston (fairmont.com) **FOUR SEASONS LOS ANGELES** (fourseasons.com) **HYATT AT OLIVE 8** Seattle (olive8.hyatt.com) **THE LANGHAM, BOSTON** (langhamhotels.com) **MANDARIN ORIENTAL NEW YORK** (mandarinoriental.com)
- RENAISSANCE BOSTON WATERFRONT HOTEL** (marriott.com) **THE RITZ-CARLTON, NEW ORLEANS** (ritzcarlton.com) **THE RITZ-CARLTON, PHILADELPHIA** (ritzcarlton.com) **█**