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## In praise of the club sandwich

It is a room-service staple in hotels from New York to New Delhi,  
but familiarity hasn't dulled the appeal of this superior fast food

By Paul Richardson

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## WORLDWIDE

We've all been there. Ten o'clock at night in a big hotel in an unfamiliar city. Bamboozled by jet lag, you realise you're hungry. A stark choice presents itself. Option A: venture forth into the hot, heaving streets to find a table for one in a restaurant where you don't understand the menu. Option B: take the lift to the hushed lobby bar of your hotel, and order a club sandwich and a beer before retiring to bed to flick idly between CNN and BBC World. Whatever your credentials as a world traveller, can you honestly say there aren't times when Option B seems the best idea?

Despite being one of the most ubiquitous of all dishes, the club sandwich retains an aura of glamour, a whisper of luxury. It is functional and comforting, yet still gives you, for an instant, that five-star-hotel feeling. As *Le Figaro* magazine put it in a recent story on the best club sandwiches in Paris (the winner, by the way, was the one served at Le Meurice hotel, price €25), the club is 'the aristocrat of sandwiches. The Rolls-Royce of the genre.'

Unlike other fast foods, the club sandwich is made smart by its pedigree. Legend ascribes its invention to the chef of a gentlemen's gambling club in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1894. It appears on the dining menu of the steamship *Rhode Island* on 17 October 1899, along with mock turtle soup and clams à la Newburg. It must have arrived in Europe in the 1920s along with the fashion for everything American: cruise liners, jazz, cocktail bars. The dish is supposed to have been a favourite of Edward VIII, and it is said that Wallis Simpson dined on it frequently during her anxious residence at Felixstowe, while she waited for the king to abdicate.

<http://www.cntraveller.com/news/2012/january/in-praise-of-the-club-sandwich>

The club sandwich has always been the classiest kind of comfort food.

Of the standard recipe there can be no doubt: a double-decker construction with sliced roast turkey on the bottom layer, and bacon, lettuce, tomato and mayonnaise on the top. It is usually cut into quarters and served with thin-cut fries. Some versions use ham instead of bacon, or roast chicken instead of turkey; one of my least favourite sub-genres has a fried egg on top of the BLT, with a peephole in the toast through which the yolk appears to stare. Generous fillings require the whole edifice to be held together with cocktail sticks. This is fine, provided you remember to remove them, or an injured lip or nose can be the embarrassing result.

Over the years I have eaten club sandwiches on four continents. None was quite the same as the last. I was particularly grateful for the one I had at the InterContinental in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, after a tour of nearby restaurants revealed the city's signature dish to be a greasy pilaf made with the fat of a sheep's tail. At The Metropolitan in New Delhi, it was what I lived on for several days after a bruising encounter with an amoeba. The one I ordered from room service in my top-floor suite at The Mark in Manhattan, washed down with a bottle of minibar Champagne as I gazed over the glittering towers of night-time New York, was an experience as unforgettable in its way as dinner at El Bulli.

The club sandwich was an icon of globalised eating before the Big Mac was even a twinkle in Ronald McDonald's eye. You won't find spices in the Indian version, or plum sauce in the Chinese one. The most inventive reinterpretations of the dish are in its homeland. Witness the grilled-lobster club at Spago in Beverly Hills (served on walnut bread with tarragon aioli and rocket), the foie gras club at Restaurant Guy Savoy in Las Vegas, and the triple-decker vegan club at Real Food Daily in West Hollywood, which replaces the turkey and bacon with seitan and tempeh and the mayonnaise with something called 'vegenaise'.

As for the world's most expensive version, that title belongs on this side of the pond. The Platinum Club Sandwich was invented by James Parkinson, executive chef at Waldo's Restaurant at Cliveden in Berkshire, whose combination of quails' eggs, white truffle, Ibérico ham, roast poulet de Bresse, frisée lettuce, semi-dried tomatoes, homemade mayonnaise and sourdough bread seems to me to have strayed so far from the perfection of the original concept as to be barely worth the name (to say nothing of the price: a cool £100). Call me unadventurous, but I'd rather get my jaws around a classic club any day. Give or take the fried egg.